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LAND OF FLOWERS

by

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B.A. University of South Florida, 1988

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts & Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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Major Professor: Susan Hubbard

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ABSTRACT

Land of Flowers is a collection of short fiction presenting a Florida that stands in counterpoint to the image the state holds in the national consciousness—an image of a backward region rife with rednecks, retirees, racists, and religious kooks. In contrast, these stories feature the natives, the tourists, the immigrants, and also the transplants who are drawn to this “paradise” with hopes of finding warmth, escape, and a new life that so often fails to materialize.

Many of the inhabitants of these stories are mired in a state of introspection. In the title piece, an early Spanish explorer contemplates his existence as well as that of God’s. In another story, an actor/bartender considers how eking out a living at a luxurious resort has sapped his passion for the theater. In trying to save a family of doves, a father finds a metaphor for his role as protector and provider for his own family. Another story is about an old man dying in the palmetto brush who discovers comfort in a place far from a society that no longer suits him. Space and place are the threads that holds these stories together: place in regard to the topographical Florida, and space in regard to where the main characters are mentally.

The true physical landscape of the territory that once extended as far west as New Orleans is depicted in many of the stories—a landscape shorn of condos, strip malls, and theme parks, a landscape that defines Florida as wild, open, raw, and primal in the best sense of the word. These stories of people, place, and space work against the stereotypes and toward a deeper understanding of Florida.

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To my wife and children, I will never be able to fully thank you for the sacrifices you've made and the stress you have endured, but I look forward to trying.

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OF THE LAND

Blue Gil

Gil was getting twitchy and he wasn't looking so good either. Sweat seemed like it was coming out every pore of his body. His body was probably craving the alcohol.

"Easy, Gil, easy." I placed my hand on his pale forearm to keep him from jerking the fishing rod too soon. His skin was clammy and cold.

"That's just the shrimp dancing around a bit. Not yet. You know that. Just wait," I said.

"Okay . . . Spider," he replied after a pause.

Funny me telling Gil what to do because he knew this part of the lagoon and the ways of fish better than I could ever hope to. We sat cramped up in a twelve-foot aluminum jon boat just off Turtle Mound. A white cone bobber with an orange stripe at its base floated point down, not more than ten yards out in front of us. The tide pulled the water around the hull of the anchored boat. Blue crabs floated by. A mamma manatee and her pup swam between the boat and the bobber. I heard something big, maybe tarpon, maybe dolphin, hitting a school of fish behind us. We stared at the bobber, trying to read its every move.

The heavy summer air was cooling due to a storm off to the north that looked to be creeping our way. Out past the bobber a snowy egret caught my eye as it moved real slow-like along the oyster beds. It stopped, stood on one leg, and just like that, the egret stabbed its orange beak into the murky water. When it sprang back, there was a small mullet speared on to its bill. The egret stretched its skinny neck up, lifted its head to the

sky, and swallowed that mullet whole. The egret spotted me, leapt up into the air and floated for a second or two with its wings all stretched out before drifting back behind the mangroves and out of sight. My eyes went back to the bobber, which Gil's gaze had never left. A school of clear needlefish skirted around the bobber.

This was the third time I'd taken Gil out fishing in the past month. It still felt weird: me playing the part of guide, me twisting the motor's tiller and driving us around the lagoon, me coaching him instead of him coaching me. Things were different now. He seemed like a crumpled old man even though he was only about thirty. Only a few years older than I was. It made me sad to see him like that. He'd sunk so far. Mamma used to say, "Beware of alcohol. It always starts with 'just one sip.' Next thing you know, you're seeing life through the bottom of a bottle."

It wasn't too long after I went to work for him that Gil took me out fishing for the first time. Oh, it may have been 1965, but this was still the South we're talking about, and you best believe people at the boat ramp gave us the stink-eye when we rolled his boat off the trailer and into the water. I was scared. Especially when Gil went to park his truck and I was all alone on the boat ramp holding the boat's line. The way they was all eyeing me, I felt like a wounded boar surrounded by a pack of wild dogs. But Gil's family had been here much longer than most, so no one said boo to him about taking a Negro out fishing. He had a flat bottom, stump-knocker with the steering wheel, that was about waist high, mounted at the bow of the boat. He had her all painted up in camouflage. She was a beaut.

Man, it was something the way he was. We hauled ass out of Edgewater and headed south down the Indian River, far from Callalisa Creek where I fished from shore and toward Mosquito Lagoon where he fished from his boat. The motor roared and the wind whipped my face and filled my ears. He stood tall on the boat's bow—all smiling and excited—and turned his head to yell things that I couldn't even hear the half of, what with all the commotion going on. He did an awful lot of hooting too. I thought he was crazy.

Occasionally, he stopped the boat at this hole or that and told me what you'd catch there. "See, here's a good place, on an outgoing tide that is, to catch black drum, especially when the moon's right. Hook yourself up a mud crab or a small blue crab and just ease it into that hole. You'll catch a good-sized drum most every time," he'd say—or something just like it.

I'd never even been on a motorboat before, but one day he let me drive his.

"Nothing to it, Spider. Don't be shy now. You pull back on that throttle. Let's see what she's got." The boat got up on plane and we shot down the river. Right down the middle of the channel. I wish I had me a photo of all those white faces staring at us when we roared by with me at the wheel. You know they'd never seen a "darkie" driving a motorboat before.

But as I looked across the jon boat now, he didn't even seem related to that wild man hooting and hollering that day out on the stump-knocker. I couldn't get used to how he was now. "Let's run a top-water plug, its early still," I'd say in the morning, or, "Let's

drop a mullet here . . . free-line a shrimp over there,” I’d say when the sun was up. Just didn’t feel right. He knew all this. Hell, he’d taught it all to me.

Attached to the fishing line beneath the bobber was a jumbo live shrimp hooked right behind its head. Earlier, when I grabbed the shrimp out of the bait bucket, it’d poked a hole in my finger that was still dripping bright red blood into the bottom of the boat. Sometimes I could feel kind of sorry for the shrimp I was baiting up. I didn’t feel sorry for the shrimp now.

At times the bobber floated still, long enough to make me wonder if somehow a crab or catfish or little snapper had come and plucked the shrimp off the hook. Sometimes I wondered what the shrimp was a-doing down there. I imagined the shrimp floated, rested, and considered his situation—as best a shrimp could. Occasionally, like now, the shrimp would dive down, pulling the bobber just out of sight, like it was figuring out the line, seeing how far it could go. It could fool you into thinking you had a fish. But fish pulled down in a different way that varied depending on what type of fish it was.

“Easy, buddy. Easy,” I said.

Gil was sweaty, trembling and whiter than a flounder’s belly. The bobber popped back to the surface and, once it settled, all was calm again. I took my hand off his arm, looked at him and said, “It’s okay. Don’t worry, Gil, You’re gonna be okay.”

Most every man I know around here drinks some or a lot. Hell, Gil and I would have a couple few beers almost every day after working his almond grove. No big deal. But over the last few months Gil had been drinking more and more. Every day it seemed,

and not just beer. And not just after work. I figured it was at the point where he was some kind of drunk all the time. Far more than once I had to fetch him late night from the Stumble Inn because he was too drunk to even stand on his own and make it home. Being colored, I wasn't allowed in, but they'd have him propped outside by the front door, passed out, sitting on the ground with his legs spread out in front of him. I'd haul him off in his truck. The keys were always in the glove box waiting for me. I put Gil in the bed of the truck on top of some blankets, case he threw up or something. I was worried about him, but there wasn't much I could say that he'd listen to. I figured he'd get past this rough patch sooner or later.

The sun was full up now, bouncing off the water. It made us to squint toward the bobber.

"You ever fish this hole before?" I knew the answer, but asked anyway.

He jerked his head a little to answer yes.

"Whatcha figure is down there?" I asked.

Gil studied on it for a time and then replied, "Snook."

Right at that moment the shrimp shot up out of the water and sprinted across the surface until the bobber snapped his run to an end and pulled him back.

"Something's after him . . . wait . . . wait," I whispered.

I went to put my hand on his arm again, but Gil knocked it away. From below, the shrimp pulled the bobber along the surface—zigging and zagging. The bobber jerked down and up a couple of times and then, in a flash, it was gone for good.

"Now," I shouted. "Now."

Gil snapped the tip of the rod up to set the hook in the fish's jaw and the jon boat lurched back and forth in response.

"Get him, Gil. He's a big one!" I yelled.

The fishing reel screamed out line as he fumbled to loosen the drag to keep the line from snapping. After adjusting the drag, he cranked hard on the reel, raising the rod up and down, up and down.

He gasped. "Big . . . one."

He was right. I smiled. "C'mon, Gil, get him."

I was seeing a glimmer of the old Gil, the friend I knew. He kept the fish out of the mangrove where it would surely wrap the line up on the roots to try and break free. The tip of the rod bent far down, but Gil kept the line from snapping. After about ten minutes, the fish wore itself out, probably just before Gil would've worn himself out. With his rod raised high up in the air, he guided the fish to the boat's bow. I dipped the net into the water beneath the monster fish and scooped up a snook bigger than any I'd seen in quite some time. It was beautiful, all silvery-bright, with a black stripe running the length of its body. As the water dripped off, the fish flopped about in the net—back and forth, back and forth—gasping for freedom.

"All right!" I said. "All right." I slapped Gil on the back, which caused him to cringe.

"Man, he's sure gonna to taste good all grilled up with lemon and pepper." My mouth watered, snook being one of my favorite fish to eat.

"Let him go," Gil said.

“What? Are you crazy?”

“Let him go,” he repeated louder. “It’s my fish. And I say let him go.”

I’d never seen Gil let go a fish that was eating-size unless we had plenty caught already. It made me wonder if feeling sorry for himself made him feel sorry for the fish. He sat all tired and trembling from the fight. Even so, a grin creased his face. A grin I’d given up on ever seeing again. I wet my hands and held the snook softly in the water by the side of the boat until the fish recovered. Then I let him go and he disappeared into the lagoon.

* * *

Before I met Gil I hadn’t known any white man that I could call anything but “sir.” And quite a few I’d just as soon call “peckerwood” as anything else. But before I met Gil, I hadn’t *met* any white man I wanted to call anything but “sir” or “peckerwood.”

He had hired me, and a crew of guys I rounded up from the west side, to work his almond grove. Things went as usual, with him telling me each morning what we were supposed to do that day and me telling the others and minding them as well. After a couple of weeks, during lunch one day, he asked me to join him in the barn to talk, away from the others.

“First off, my name is Gil,” he said.

“Yes sir. I know.”

“And I’d just as soon you stop calling me *sir*. Sir is my daddy. And he’s dead . . . most likely in hell I suppose. Call me Gil,” he told me.

“Yes sir. I mean, Gil.”

“They call you Spider. Is that your real name?” he asked.

“No.”

“What you want to be called?”

“Spider,” I said.

He thought that to be funny and after laughing, said, “You’re a real hard worker. Got a good head on your shoulders too.”

“I got a business proposition for you if you’re interested,” he said.

“Won’t know until I hear it,” I replied.

He continued, “How about you come here and work full time? Most times I just need an extra pair of hands and another strong back. We can always hire them boys of yours when we need more help.

I wasn’t so sure of it. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll pay you more. Hell, you can live out here if you want.”

At the time I was living with Mamma and my little sister Shirl in a shotgun shack on Duss Street over on the west side. Now I love my family, but Mamma and Shirl were going at it more and more often and driving me more and more crazy. I was always caught in the middle of it and was just about done with it all. So the prospect of getting out of there perked my ears right up.

“That last part . . . where would I live?” I asked.

“Up at the house, I guess. There’re plenty of empty rooms. A couple bathrooms.”

At that point in time I'd just as soon live alone, so I asked, "How 'bout right here?" It was a barn but a clean one that was mostly empty except for some tools and a couple of tractors. There was no livestock in it and looked like there never had been.

"In the barn? Hell, I don't get it."

"You lived with my Mamma and sister, you'd get it," I said.

He laughed and looked around. "Well, we could wall up the back end. It's got a door. There's a work sink and window back there. That'd be okay. We can figure out the rest later." He held out his hand. "Deal?"

"Yes sir," I said as I shook his hand. He shot me a look and I fixed it. "I mean Gil."

Daddy and Mamma split when I was just three. Mamma said often over the years, "Some things just aren't meant to be." She wasn't angry—she still loved him—and I understood. Daddy was called Zeke by his friends, which was short for Ezekial. And those who knew him back then told me he was a good man and Mamma agreed. There was little work in town so he traveled to wherever he could find it. Daddy was always sending money and postcards from this place or that. He even sent a postcard from California once.

He'd come back from time-to-time and things would be all right. Things would be good. The house would glow warm and Daddy would play his records. Mamma would make dinner while he told me of places he'd been and things he'd done. He'd seen cotton fields white like snow, spiny lobsters, and enormous brown buffalo. After dinner they'd laugh and dance and eventually tuck me into bed.

“You know son, I love you,” he’d always say.

“I know, Dad,” I always replied.

And every time he’d say, “Always, son, no matter what.”

And just like that, he’d be gone again for months on end.

It was during one of those “time-to-time” visits that Shirl was created. She never met Daddy because before she was born, he was dead. A coal mine in West Virginia took him away. I had memory of him to hold onto and I tried to share it with Shirl as best I could, so she could see a man named Father when she closed her eyes.

Mamma got a little colder and a little stricter after he was gone for good. She instantly seemed older.

With Daddy’s money no longer trickling in, Mamma worked at the dry cleaner’s most every day and took in some sewing on the side. Her life wore on her, and she had little time for the foolishness Shirl seemed destined to provide.

Shirl was seventeen when she quit working in the kitchen at Norwood’s on a whim. Mamma was mad because there weren’t so many good jobs back then and Norwood’s Fish Shack was one of them. Shirl was able to fool Mamma for a few days by leaving like regular in the morning and staying away until the time she’d usually come home. It was only a matter of time before someone in the neighborhood let Mamma know about Shirl’s quitting Norwoods. And when she found out, Mamma was fit to be tied.

“Hezekiah, that sister of yours is just plain flighty. That was a good job. Can’t you talk some sense into her?” Mamma said to me, knowing full well the answer to be “no.” Mama was the only person on this earth that still called me by my given name and

hearing that name always got my attention. Mamma followed Shirl around the house yelling and picking at her, but Shirl was used to Mamma's behavior by that time and could ignore her while flitting about her business as if the world around her was a calm and peaceful place. I knew enough to stay away. Things settled down and after a while, being at home full-time with Mamma forced upon Shirl a sudden desire to visit me at the grove a few times a week to bring me lunch and linger.

I could sense trouble the first time she came by. The way Gil was looking at her. Just little glances here and there. And the way she did that thing she does where she's just being herself but does something extra. Kind of like she was a little girl and a grown woman all rolled up into one. I could always tell when she was keen on a fella. I told her to stay away from him, knowing full well it might make her like him all the more. I'd never got in her business before, so I thought maybe she'd take it serious.

I said, "I want you to keep away from Gil, you hear. He's my friend and I don't want you doing him like you done all the others."

"Whatever do you mean, dear brother?" She batted her eyes all sassy-like.

"Dammit, girl you know what I mean and don't act like you don't."

"I just come to visit. To bring my kind brother some lunch."

"Hogwash! I've seen how he looks at you and how you're doing your thing back at him."

"Now I got no control over a gentlemen looking at me. And I got no idea what you mean by my doing my 'thing,' I assure you."

I was getting plenty hot by that point. “Girl. I know your ways. I can spot it a mile off. You might as well be a bitch in heat, as good as I can see it. You aren’t fooling me.”

It was like talking to the wind, because she’d walked away ignoring me. I yelled at her, “I don’t want you messing up my job like you done with yours.”

I couldn’t see it, she was my little sister, but she was something special as far as the other men folk were concerned. She had almond-skin colored eyes, nappy hair and a big, bright gap-toothed smile. Where I was tall and lanky, she was small, thin, and had a strong body. Men always took a shine to her, but she didn’t always take a shine back. And when she did, it never lasted very long. I warned him about Shirl, but he didn’t listen. I guess fellas always think its gonna be different for them. That their gonna be the one to tame the wild mare. I warned Gil about Shirl. He wouldn’t listen. I told him she’d warm you like the sun. But like the sun she’d always run off after a while, and darkness would follow. Once I seen it happening, I did hope this time would be different and I guess in some ways it was.

Things were good for a while. She’d come around bringing lunch for me, and eventually lunch for Gil as well. After a time, she’d stay after we’d gone back to work shaking the almonds off the trees and she’d clean up after lunch, maybe feed the chickens. Gil told her he’d give her some money, if she’d come a couple times a week and clean up the house. And that was that.

Soon enough she would stay the night as often as she felt Mamma would believe she was staying with me. I kept my mouth shut. There was nothing to gain from telling Mamma. Besides, looking to the past, I figured it would all play itself out in a week or

two. As regular, I kept to the barn at night and tried to ignore what was surely going on inside the house. But try as I might, sometimes I couldn't ignore the laughter that would drift down to the barn, and sometimes other noises too.

They invited me to supper a few times. I found excuses not to go. They both knew I didn't approve. I finally said yes to keep from being rude. I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe Shirl to be like a house slave or something. But whatever I was expecting, wasn't what I saw. Shirl had kept the house real clean and the meal looked good as Mamma could make. What I didn't expect was a couple.

I went up to the door. "Welcome," Shirl said as she opened the door. Shirl was cleaned up all nice and fancy; Gil, too. They led me to the dining room, which I'd never figured was the dining room before, seeing as how the table had been covered with tools, papers, boxes, fishing tackle, and the like. Also, it was always dark in there. Not now. There was a sparkly glass light, I'd never noticed before, hanging above the table. There might have been a sheet thrown over it before. The table had a proper tablecloth and there was china and all manner of silverware.

"Dinner sure does smell good, doesn't it?" Gil motioned me to sit. Shirl was in the kitchen.

Feeling not dressed up enough, I said, "I gotta get cleaned up some more."

"Ah, don't worry about it. Your sister wanted this to be fancy. You know how she can be."

I did *not* know how she ‘can be’, because I’d never seen her like this before. It was almost like she was playing house, but life-size. I ran down to the barn, washed up and put on my Sunday go-to-meeting clothes.

By the time I got back, supper was on the table. “Now I told you he could clean up good, didn’t I?” Shirl beamed.

“You sure did, honey. You were right.” He pulled her in for a hug.

Did he just say “honey”? The rest of the evening seemed like something out of a movie. Everything was proper, and just so. I didn’t know what to think of it. Had Shirl really changed? What was they thinking anyway?

It was like a dream—like, their own little paradise. After supper, they’d walk hand in hand through the groves, something they could never do in town. They were so happy. Laughing. Staring at each other. Sitting on the porch, rocking away, talking up a storm, or just sitting there, holding hands. They *were* in a paradise, away from the rest of the world, like it didn’t exist. One thing is for sure, the real world did exist outside Gil’s farm. And I’ll tell you what, that world had strong thoughts against race mixing—on both sides.

Time passed, and one night I heard tapping on the barn door. It was Shirl. I knew it was trouble because no one had come down there at night before.

“Hezekiah, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Oh hell. What you done now, girl?”

She was kind of smiling, “I think . . . I might could be pregnant.”

“What do you mean ‘think’? Dammit girl, either you are or you aren’t.”

Still smiling, she put her hands on her belly. You know how women do when they have a baby inside. “I am pregnant.”

“I don’t know what the hell you smiling for. Does Gil know?”

“No. Not . . . yet. Why are you so angry?”

“Angry? What are you thinking? That you and Gil are gonna stay cooped up on this farm. Not let anyone know? What do you think life is going to be like for that child? West side won’t want nothing to do with it. And you damn sure know the white folk won’t want nothing to do with it. I not even gonna mention the hell Mamma’s gonna give you.”

“But it’s my baby. This baby’s gonna be so sweet, so beautiful.”

I had to try hard to keep from yelling, so I whispered real loud, “Don’t no one gonna care about some half black, half white baby. You know that. Dammit, Shirl, I told you not to mess with him. You best not tell him, and you best take care of this. You hear me.”

She was crying, “What you mean ‘take care of this’?” Her face all frightened and twisted up.

“You damn well know what I mean.”

And she did. She ran off in to the groves, sobbing into the night.

She’d gone to Mamma’s, but I knew there was no way in hell she was talking to Mamma about it. Within a few days she was back, and I figured it was done. Things were back to normal—she’d bring us lunch, she and Gil would walk around after supper or sit on the porch. There was a little less laughter, but that was to be expected, considering it

all. She'd get over it. If she was only gonna listen to me once in her life, I was glad she did it this time.

Shirl was still keeping up appearances and going to Mamma's a few nights a week, so when she was gone a few days, Gil thought nothing of it. But when she hadn't come back after four or five days, Gil came asking after her. It was then I knew she'd run off. It was then I knew, deep down inside, she had kept the baby.

I was right, Mamma hadn't seen her for days. There I was stuck in the middle again. Consoling Mamma on one side, and Gil on the other. Both were devastated. Gil wanted to track her down. I talked him out of it. He'd never find her if she didn't want to be found. Mamma knew better, she knew if Shirl wanted to be gone, she was going to be gone. I didn't tell neither of them about the baby.

* * *

I figured losing Shirl was why Gil had taken to drinking so much. I felt bad, like it was somehow my fault Shirl ran off. She should've done what I said. I told her. Many months went by. By the time I took him fishing that day, he'd already lost the farm, too. He was really down low. I tried to keep him fishing. Taking him out at least once a week. It seemed to be working. Gil seemed on the mend.

It was a calm November morning with a bit of a chill in the air. A boy Mamma sent told me to come.

Down by the lagoon, the sunrise set about driving away some morning fog. A school of pinfish jumped out the water all at once, no doubt darting away from a larger fish. A woodpecker was knocking up in a tree somewhere close by. Out in the lagoon, a

dolphin surfaced to blow out one breath and take in another. I smelled the rotten fruit of a sour orange tree I knew to be not too far off in the woods.

I walked down the hill toward the water. There were four of the sheriff's men, uniformed, drinking coffee, and laughing near the shoreline of Turtle Mound. They looked like thick-necked pit bulls and they quieted down when they saw me walking up.

"Look, here comes Gil's nigger buddy," one of the deputies said loud enough for me to hear. They got all stiff as they turned to me, which let me know I probably shouldn't come any closer. About thirty yards out in the lagoon a naked body was floating face down in the water, held in place by the crab trap line it was tangled up in. A couple of wobbly young deputies on the sheriff's boat slipped large rescue hooks underneath the body and, after several clumsy attempts, pulled it to the boat's bow. Gil's legs and arms drooped down from his limp body and his head clunked along the side of the boat as they struggled to pull him on board. The blue and white striped crab trap line was still tangled all around him. My eyes started to well up, but I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing my tears.

"Now that's the strangest crab trap float I ever did see," the loud deputy half-yelled to the world. His friends laughed, snickered, and snorted.

"You hear what I said boy? I said your drunk-buddy makes for a strange trap float. Isn't that funny? You hear me boy? I SAID ISN'T THAT FUNNY?" he said in a tone demanding a reply.

"Yes sir," I forced an answer, "very funny."

My body tightened up, my blood was getting hot, and my arms stiffened and had

fists at their ends. The loud deputy noticed, stared, and then dipped his head down before pulling it back up slow.

“Aw . . . I’m just kidding around,” he said to me and then he turned to his friends and said real loud, “Niggers got no sense of humor.” They chuckled at this and went back to talking to each other. Drinking their coffee as if I wasn’t there.

“Yes, sir. No sense of humor,” I said to no one but myself as I turned my back and walked away.

Spider

“Toxey done killed a nigra.” That’s what they would’ve said, but most of the people that would have said such a thing were long gone.

That’s what they would’ve said, assigning the act little more significance than if he’d run over a dog and maybe just a little less if the animal had been the town’s favorite dog—a blue tick coonhound named Sugah.

Like most news in this part of the county, it would’ve welled out the front doors of Little’s Pharmacy and Fountain on Canal street and flowed in all directions: east—past the marina and Angler’s Club, down the causeway, up the drawbridge, over the River, and then spilled onto the barrier island, moving to the Inlet on one end and Bethune Beach on the other end; south—it would’ve rippled through Edgewater toward the fish camps and wild areas of Oak Hill where people that want and need to be left alone, are; west—it would’ve surged through the slash pines and sod farms, and eventually bubbled up through the ferns picked by brown migrant hands in DeLand; and to the north—it would’ve seeped to Spruce Creek where the indigo and almond plantations used to be, where the land was a dense mass of saw palmetto brush, sugar sand and general inhospitableness—and where Toxey found himself at this particular time.

Yes. “Toxey done killed a nigra.” That’s what they would’ve said, but that was then—and this is now.

* * *

Toxey couldn’t quite recall all that had happened. His neck was sore. His head ached and his gaze locked upon the large, full moon overhead—so bright, so crisp, and so

clear. He saw the craters on its face. As he cast his eyes down, he realized how much the light blue moon lit up the forest around him. An ancient live oak twenty yards away spread its bearded tentacles out and over the land. Its shadows, like a vast spider's web, floated over the landscape. A breeze rustled the leaves, pine needles, and palmetto fronds. His chin dropped down, and when he came to, his vision settled on a smattering of sand lion pits in the sugar sand to his right. He found himself wanting to drop ants into the craters as an offering to the creatures living at the bottom, just like he had as a boy in these very same woods. Back then, he pretended to be a giant on Mars dropping aliens into craters. The ants would scramble to make it up the sloping sides trying to escape. They never did. They always slid down to the bottom where the sand lion awaited its prey.

His eyes followed his pant leg to his right foot, which pointed straight up to the sky like a sundial and threw a shadow like one, too. A slow swoop to his other foot revealed a not so similar situation. His left foot lay flat on the ground, pointing to the other foot. He studied on this for a time, considered what it meant, got distracted, and then spoke.

Spider.

Spider, can you hear me?

C'mon, wake up.

Spider lay resting on his back, face to the heavens, and said not one word. His head was near Toxey's left thigh. He had wiry charcoal and white hair that looked like the deer moss on the ground around them. A small amount of blood pooled in Spider's

nose and glistened dark purple in the moonlight. Toxey's shoulder hurt, but he lifted his arm, nudged Spider, and then let his hand lie on Spider's still chest. He was not alone. For the first time in so long—Toxey was not alone.

Though on this earth for more than seventy years, Toxey had rare occasion to speak to a black person, let alone touch one. The town divided itself to this day by the railroad that bisected Canal Street—blacks on the west side, whites on the east. An unspoken law, that all knew, said that sunset best not find a black man on the east side of the tracks.

Toxey recalled that more than forty years ago a black man had extended his long, skinny arm with a hand made up of worm-like fingers for Toxey to grip and shake. Stunned, Toxey had looked around. He couldn't believe it. Right there on Canal Street, in broad daylight, for all the world to see. And the world stood still with the black hand hanging out there in waiting. Toxey stared at the palm of the hand and thought about how much like his it looked. Why were black folk's palms and soles the same color as those of white people? Toxey hesitated far too long before he grabbed the bony mitt. The black fingers wrapped around his. They shook hands and the deal was made. That man was Spider and as soon as Spider turned his back to walk away, Toxey scrubbed his hand off on his overalls' leg.

Toxey ran his hand along the same leg now. His hand could feel his leg, but his leg felt nothing. His vision wavered as he looked to Spider.

Spider, I'm sorry.

You know . . .

That's just how it was back then.

Things were different.

His head flopped down.

Toxey woke to the droning buzz of the cicadas. The warmth from the pick-up truck's engine block was disappearing and the hiss from the cracked radiator had long since bled away. The beam from his now one-eyed truck shot out a spotlight over his shoulder and into the palmetto brush. The passenger side of the truck's grille was caved in around the large slash pine he had hit. The odor of pine resin, joined with the smell of gasoline and burnt radiator fluid, seeped into the cool night air. His pride and joy—a freshly cleaned, mint condition, mustard yellow 1975 Ford F150 Ranger XLT—was mint condition no more. Neither was he, neither was Spider.

Back in the old days if you needed some coloreds for work, you sought Spider. And such was the case that day so long ago on Canal Street when Toxey shook Spider's hand. Toxey's older brother Gil had bought an almond grove near Turnbull Bay and needed some workers to clear out under the trees, shake the almonds down and then complete the harvest once the almonds dried. Toxey went along that day to meet Spider as a show of support because Gil's latest venture, for once, had at least a glimmer of hope compared to some of the cockamamie plans he had come up with in the past. For years it seemed that the only time Toxey heard from Gil was if he needed money or needed help getting out of some trouble he'd gotten into. Their brotherhood had been strained by years of neglect and different paths chosen.

Earlier in the evening, Toxey had sat alone on his front porch rocking in his chair

and looked out onto the street. The saplings of his childhood loomed large over houses that held the ghosts of neighbors now dead and new inhabitants who never bothered to say “hello” or “good morning” to the old man that Toxey had become. Even the children who played out in front of his house never waved or said so much as a word to him. It was as if he was invisible. Alone in this world, he wanted to visit the past and was driven to the woods of his youth.

“He’s so skinny you couldn’t hit him with a handful of dried corn,” people liked to say back then, and they certainly said it about Spider. He was a gangly six foot six tall and all arms and legs. That’s why the white folk called him Spider. Toxey didn’t know what Spider’s real name was.

Toxey wondered what Spider was doing out here in the woods, but when he followed the truck’s light, he saw a camp of sorts—actually, it was more like . . . a home.

In a small clearing, in the middle of all the saw palmetto, there was a lean-to. It was rough looking, but properly made, built of gypsum board, plywood, old signs, various timbers, and corrugated tin roofing. No doubt, all the materials were provided by the hurricanes that roared through the area several years back.

In front, there was a coquina stone fire pit with a G.I. mess kit and a smoldering smudge pot to its side. A few empty turtle shells were strewn about. A small American flag fluttered from a broomstick nailed to a spindly scrub oak. His own house empty in so many ways since his wife died years ago from the cancer, Toxey couldn’t help but admire the setup.

Hell, Spider, you sure do got yourself a nice little place out here.

You always were a smart one.

Hell, I’d just as soon live out here as back in town.

Here it's quiet, peaceful, still the same as it used to be.

The wind blew. The night was getting cooler. A shrieking filled the forest.

You hear that screech owl? So much noise for such a small creature.

Little bugger must not be far off.

I remember hunting out here with Gil. That was long ago.

Those were good times.

Got me a twelve-point buck not too far from here.

Not too far at all.

While we was bleeding it, Gil cut them horns off.

He held 'em up by his head and chased me all over.

He was always good for a laugh.

Toxey chuckled a bit until a searing pain and heat rose in his ribs to put an end to his laughter.

Few but Toxey and Spider were alive today who knew about the leaf-riddled road that glowed white before them. The main road, Martin Dairy Road, died in the preserve, but this was an old, unused utility road of hard packed crushed coquina shell that went to parts of the preserve rarely travelled by the public these days. This was the last bit of pristine land that remained as it had existed back when he was young—back when Spider was young. The place warmed him now and he turned to Spider.

Last time I seen you, you was wading 'round, gigging redfish in Callalisa Creek.

Moving all slow like. Harpoon raised. Like a heron hunting pinfish.

Just like I used to do when I was a boy.

We'd go down there catching fiddler crabs for bait.

Gil and I.

Toxey had his own concerns back when Gil owned the grove. Spider had basically run the grove for the last year or so before the bank took it away. Gil took to drinking and spent more and more time at the Stumble Inn bar slurping cheap Haitian rum, running amok, and brushing up against the law on more than one occasion. Never much of a drinker, Toxey had little use for Gil once he took to the booze, and he pretty much kept away from his brother and the almond grove. But he knew Gil and Spider were friends and that Spider was living on the property, helping Gil out. Better him than me, Toxey had thought at the time.

The Sheriff fished Gil's naked body out of Mosquito Lagoon some years after the bank took his grove. Except for Spider, Gil had run off any other friends he might have had, and Toxey was his only living relation. A funeral seemed pointless. Toxey took his jon boat, Spider, and Gil out Haulover Canal one night and dumped Gil's ashes into the very same lagoon he drowned in. Toxey hadn't said a word the entire time. After Gil's death, Toxey had even less to do with Spider than before.

A fly was buzzing around Spider's brow now and landed on his nose. Toxey brushed the fly away and, as he brought his hand back, he let his fingers run across the salt-and-pepper stubble on Spider's face.

Can't pick your family, Spider.

You know what I mean?

Gil was never much . . .

You know. His drinking and all.

Toxey noticed a small emblem pinned to Spider's jacket collar—a triangular

shape with rounded corners that held a yellow background divided by a diagonal black stripe with a black horse's head to one side. He reached out and fumbled the pin between his fingers. Now the camp's familiarity made sense. It was straight out of the Army's Survival Guide.

You was Cavalry, I remember now.

Korea . . . you went before me.

They shouldah let you boys into the VFW.

We . . .

Before he could finish, leaves shook and palmetto fronds slapped, bringing dreaded wild boar to Toxey's mind. His brain forgot his present state and told Toxey to find a tree and climb as fast as he could. He twisted his torso to spring up and scurry only to be anchored by the dead weight of his lower body and pinned back by the pain that the motion had brought to life in his upper body. Escape was impossible. Toxey had seen what a boar did to a friend's cow once, and he couldn't imagine a worse fate. Blood and gore everywhere. It looked like the cow had swallowed a live hand grenade. He wished he had his gun. He'd brought the pistol from the house that evening and put it on the truck's bench seat beside him, but he was in no condition to retrieve it and, in all likelihood, the crash had thrown it somewhere. Without realizing it, Toxey formed his hand into the shape of a pistol.

Toxey braced himself as the thrashing was getting close. He winced in anticipation and when the thrashing stopped abruptly, he squinted open his eyes one at a time. Lo and behold not more than ten yards away, directly in the headlight's beam sat the biggest bobcat he'd ever seen, just sitting on its haunches and looking right at him. He was glad it wasn't a boar. But, truth was, a bobcat could mess you up pretty good too.

The headlight's beam had held Spider in its track right before Toxey hit him. A

broken branch in the road caused Toxey to swerve his truck into an unexpected meeting with Spider. It hadn't seemed real—Spider out here, like a forgotten ghost—but the truck hit Spider and then the tree nonetheless. Toxey came out here to visit a world longed for but lost. He came out here to escape his life and found something—found someone.

The beast was panting hard, mouth agape with his pink sandpaper tongue bouncing rapidly up and down. Toxey heard his labored breath. Toxey stared at the bobcat staring at him. There was blood dripping, one drop at a time, from a pencil-sized puncture wound in the white fur of his chest. Something had got to him. Maybe he'd been shot, maybe he'd been in a fight. Either way, he was injured. The sound of the beast's breathing pulled at Toxey.

Spider.

You see that?

The bobcat remained focused and unafraid—catching his breath. He appeared to be taking refuge in the truck's beam of light, hoping man's presence would protect him from whatever had wounded him.

You see that, Spider?

Toxey looked down for a reply. A hound bayed in the distance behind the truck and when he looked up, the bobcat was gone.

Well, I'll be damned.

That was something, wasn't it.

The truck's battery was losing energy, and the headlight was begininng to dim. The night was getting cold. Toxey shivered. His body hurt. He hadn't planned on dying out here, not like this. He was getting tired, and his mind filled with thoughts.

Spider, you seen kids these days?

Britches halfway down their ass, like theys proud to show they got some

underwear on.

Blaring music. It's either rap about killing cops, smoking dope and beating women or it sounds like metal noise with the Devil himself screaming. Hell, makes me long for hippies, it does. I can't believe I'm saying it. Carol Ann sure would laugh at that . . .

Remember when Canal Street actually had a canal that ran along the side of the road?

Those were good times.

I miss her . . .

You ever see bear playing down on Bethune Beach? It's a beautiful sight.

All mansions there now. Taxes more than what we paid for our house!

Remember when Bethune was for blacks only? None living there anymore.

Oranges, almonds. Blue crab, snook, redfish, shrimp, spoonbill, turkey, deer . . . Everywhere.

Now it's snowbirds. Loud, rude snowbirds everywhere.

Development? What's so god damn developed 'bout condominiums and superstores?

Realtors wanting me to sell? Where would I go?

Old folks home? Drooling in a rocking chair.

Live oak hammocks. Trees.

Hell, banana spiders. Remember? There used to be hundreds upon hundreds of them. Too many to count.

Black and bright yellow and as big as your hand. Everywhere, webs.

You'd walk down to Turtle Mound and the webs were like a glowing white tunnel over the path. It was beautiful, like walking into heaven.

Banana spiders everywhere. I haven't seen a single one in . . . so long now.

Remember how it used to be, Spider? Remember?

Spider wasn't much for conversation at this point. Toxey looked down at one of the few men remaining who knew what he was talking about, one of the few who could have remembered. The truck's one eye flickered out. Toxey was cold and tired. Sunrise seemed so far away. It felt like a good time for a body to go to sleep.

Red

Though the two days of driving from the red, yellow and orange leaves of the Midwest to the vibrant green foliage of Florida had worn them out, the nighttime stroll on the beach had revitalized them. Dianne was going to go down to the hot tub by the pool with a glass of wine, a novel, and a mind to “soak her sore muscles to the rhythm of the ocean.”

As Red watched her gather her things, he thought about the strain his near-two years of unemployment had put on their fifteen-year marriage—constant underlying tension, bickering, and sometimes shouting. He’d been lucky to find a job five months ago with the city’s civil engineering department. The money was less than he made in the private sector, but Dianne was finally able to land a full-time position with the radiology group she had worked for over the past few years.

Though things were getting better, they’d each said some things during their fights that needed time to forgive, but they’d made it through the financial stress, were committed to each other, and he hoped that this vacation, their first in so many years, would help.

“See you later, honey,” she said as she was leaving.

Still gazing out the balcony’s sliding glass doors toward the moonlit sea, he said, “You sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“Red. No,” she said, sounding sterner than she probably intended.

“All right.” He wasn’t offended and was secretly glad she knew that he didn’t really want to go. He turned away from the balcony just in time to catch a glimpse of her

as the steel door whisked shut. She wore a bright yellow bikini, tan leather flip-flops, and a loosely knit macramé-looking thing that covered her from the waist up. The last thing he saw, before the door closed, was that bottom.

He'd always been what his buddies back in school would call an "ass man" and most of them were as well. They talked about "tapping" it, "hitting" it, "smacking" it, "working" it, "waxing" it, and other phrases he couldn't recall. He did remember one guy, an English major of course, who coined and tried to establish the phrase "thwarting that ass," but despite his near-relentless attempts to make it part of their lingo, it never stuck.

They were both juniors when he first saw Dianne in the Student Union. The dappled sunlight shone—at least in his memory—upon her voluptuous, blue jean-encased-rear end. She was about twenty yards away and when she turned in his direction, he gave her a little wave to which she mouthed "hi." They ended up connecting on many levels, but her ass was the initial attraction, the superficial visual stimulus, the thing that started it all. He referred, playfully, to her bottom as a "healthy bottom" because it was. Now in their early forties, she'd taken far better care of herself than he had and still had her "healthy bottom." But when Red looked down toward his feet, he saw a firmly established paunch living where a six-pack had once been. He was going to need to get back in shape.

His eyes went back to the ocean and he slid the glass door open to step out onto the balcony. The sound of the waves and the onshore wind roared in, blowing some

papers off the coffee table's glass top and depositing them helter-skelter about the room. He ignored the chaos and shut the door behind him.

Out on the balcony he was reunited with a glass of wine he'd misplaced earlier. After dipping his forefinger into the wine to pull out a tiny suicidal moth, he took a sip of the warm, earthy grapes and looked three stories down to the pool area just as Diane dipped a toe into the hot tub to test its temperature. He was feeling horny and whistled a catcall down at her, stopping her dead and causing her to cover herself and look around the empty pool area for the whistle's source. She looked scared, so he quickly whistled down again and waved his arm over his head.

"Honey, up here," he yelled down.

She looked up, smiled, and made a slow show of peeling off her wrap and letting it slip stop-and-go to the concrete. Red watched as she slid into the gurgling hot tub. Months ago, during the worst of their fighting, he had accused her of cheating on him with a friend from work. It wasn't true and it was his biggest regret. The look she gave him, before she ran from the room crying, was something he hoped he'd be able to forget some day. He hoped she would be able to forget some day, too. They were just forty-eight hours away from their regular lives, and little things like her peeling off her wrap made him feel they were on their way to more stable ground.

"Looking good," he yelled down, raising his glass to her.

Now settled into the bubbling water, she lifted her glass in reply, mouthed the word "cheers" and blew him a long kiss before starting in on her book. He looked to the ocean and took another sip of wine. There was a bar not too far up the beach and a reggae

band's music pulsed in his ears. Swaying to the music mixing with the crashing waves, he closed his eyes. The wind switched directions and, for the briefest of moments, the smell of grilling fish drifted into his nose. His senses melted together and he opened his eyes, more relaxed than he'd been in a long, long time. The wine made his mouth thick, and he looked down at his wife one last time before turning to go back inside.

Already swollen with vacation, with the music spurring him on, he dropped his head, put one hand on his belly, raised his glass and, with tiny back and forth steps, danced slow into the hotel room. Mimicking the bravado of his college buddies, he told the room, "I am gonna tap that ass tonight!"

"Dad?"

The word stopped Red cold in his tracks. He had forgotten. Red looked up. Apparently, his teenage son, Scott, was back from *his* nighttime stroll.

* * *

The next morning Red rolled over and his eyes peeled open to see the clock's glowing red numbers go from 9:23 to 9:24. Lying on his back, with arms overhead, he stretched large and groaned a little. He stared at the sparkly popcorn ceiling and scratched himself. He sighed and just as he took a deep breath in, a wave of hot, stinking morning breath blew across his face. He turned away and almost gagged. Red turned over to see a sleeping Diane smack her pasty mouth open and close. She was wonderful to him in so many ways, but her breath in the morning could be something else. It was time for him to get up and out of there. He bent over and kissed her forehead. His silk boxers from the

night before dangled on top of the television. Red grinned as he put them on and left the room in silence.

He put the coffee on and set about picking up the newspaper off the floor from the night before. With his wife and son still asleep, he could enjoy some time to himself. The coffeemaker was making a gasping sound that let him know the coffee was ready. He grabbed a cup of coffee, the *Chicago Tribune* that had made the trip with them, and then went out to the balcony to greet the morning.

The morning's salt air soothed his lungs as he sat down, and he took some deep breaths. He heard gulls screeching, the surf lapping on the shore, the wind in the palms and sea oats, and little else. After swallowing a swig of coffee and putting the paper down, he sat back, closed his eyes and let his mind wander.

A voice called in his memory. "Frederick Douglass Heron."

For as long as he could remember he'd been called Red. In small measure, it was due to the fact that Red rhymed with Fred. In large measure, it was due to the fact that there was a red tinge to his hair, to his smattering of freckles, and to his skin tone. His mother rarely spoke of his departed father, but had once allowed that Red's redness came from him. When Red was growing up, few knew his full and proper name. Only his mother, Shirl, ever used it and when she did, it usually meant trouble.

* * *

"Frederick Douglass Heron. Come in here. Right now," Shirl called from the kitchen of their two-bedroom walk-up in Chicago's Uptown area. Ten-year-old Red dropped his book to his lap and paused on the couch. What had he done? He searched his

mind for recent transgressions, offenses or misdeeds, to no avail. Taking a deep breath he dragged his feet to the kitchen to accept his punishment. Shirl sat at the green-vinyl-covered card table that served as their kitchen table. Uncrossing her arms momentarily, she pointed at the folding chair next to her. With apprehension he joined her.

“Son, you’ve been asking a lot of questions about your father lately. Let’s just get this out of the way once and for all.”

She leaned in closer. “First off, your father was dead and gone before you were born, and we’ve done just fine without him.”

Red didn’t know much about his father, but had known he was dead. He wanted to find out something he didn’t know already. Red paused. “I want to know his name. He’s *my* father and I want to know his name.”

Shirl conceded, “His name was Gil, your father’s name was Gil. And he was white.

“The next thing you should know is that I’m not from here. I grew up down south, in Florida. That’s where I met your father.”

“Tell me about him. What was he like?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“C’mon. To me it does, I want to know.”

“Well,” Shirl hesitated, “he was what we called ‘of the land.’ He was a farmer, a woodsman, sometimes a hunter when he needed to be—I suppose most of all he loved being on the water, fishing and such. He and your uncle, Spider, would go out on that

boat of Gil's whenever they got a chance. He loved that lagoon. The lagoon took him and I can't imagine a more perfect place for him to pass."

"What's a lagoon?"

The question was unexpected considering the context of the moment. She was startled by this and took a moment to recover. "I don't really know how to put it to words. Mosquito Lagoon—was like a long saltwater lake. The lagoon had this strip of land separating it from the ocean. You could almost throw a stone from the lagoon to the ocean in some places."

"Was it as big as our lake here?"

"Heavens no. Not that big. Lake Michigan is more like the size of a sea. Mosquito Lagoon is much smaller. But you know, it seemed so big back then. So peaceful and beautiful."

Shirl stopped and got a look on her face that Red had never seen before.

She went on. "There were dolphins, manatee and herons everywhere . . ."

"Herons? The birds?"

"Of course the birds, silly." She gave his shoulder a playful push.

"Tell me more about him."

"Oh, there were blue herons, purple herons, green, black, and night herons too."

"Not *them*. Tell me more about *him*."

"Oh, I see. Well, he was tall. Strong. And gentle at the same time. He had oxblood-colored hair, which means a dark red that's kind of brownish too. He laughed a

lot and never seemed to worry about the things most other folks worried about. He was a nice man, and a hard worker. He always . . . ”

“Did you love each other?” Red interrupted and regretted it before it left his mouth.

Shirl paused, and her tone became cold. “That hardly matters. I was too young. I left because it was never going to work out. Back then black and white didn’t mix down there. Still don’t, I’m sure. We never could have been together. You wouldn’t understand. I couldn’t put you through it.”

Red interrupted. “Couldn’t he have . . . ”

“Son, the past is the past and should stay where it belongs, in the past. I’ve told you all you need to know.” And that was that.

* * *

Diane’s voice roused him from his thoughts and his staring into the windswept ocean.

“Good morning, Tiger. How long have you been up?”

The grown-up Red straightened himself in the balcony’s chair and stretched his arms out, brought them over his head and swiveled his chair to see his wife. “What time is it?”

“About 10:30.”

“I don’t know, an hour or so? How’d you sleep?”

“Very. Very. Well,” she cooed.

“There’s coffee.”

“Is there now?” She slid behind his chair and started massaging his neck and shoulders as he turned back into his chair.

They watched the morning walkers plod along the beach. The waves broke small upon the shore at steady, rhythmic intervals. Small sea birds scurried along, jabbing their thin black beaks into the sand and seaweed in search of food. The wind backed off into a light breeze that brought the smell of the sea up to the balcony. A faint dinging bell signaled the raising of the north drawbridge.

“So what’s your plan for the day, big Red?” She had to jostle his shoulders to get him to respond.

“I thought I’d take Scott on a hike, a little father-and-son time. Shouldn’t be too awkward after last night.”

“What happened last night?”

“Uh, nothing. Guy stuff. Do you mind if we go?”

“Go ahead. I’ll do a little me-and-spa time. There’s a place on the main strip by the bridge that looked pretty good.”

As she leaned over to kiss the top of his balding head, he caught the foulness of her breath and shuddered.

“What’s wrong?”

“You know what. Let’s go in and brush our teeth, dragon breath.”

* * *

Red and Scott pulled into the Canaveral National Seashore parking lot, and as he locked the rental car to the beep of the alarm engaging, Red thought about his son’s birth.

It seemed not so long ago that the doctor pulled out the bloody, squirming mass from inside his wife, held it up and proclaimed, “It’s a boy!” Diane had soldiered through a nine-hour labor and pushed out their eight-pound son amid a steady stream of exaggerated blowing, deep grunts and long groans.

A masked nurse in scrubs gloves held up gleaming stainless steel surgical scissors and asked, “Does Dad want to cut the cord?” Red hadn’t even known that that was part of his birthing duties. Nodding a meek ‘yes,’ he took the scissors, stared down at the creepy, grayish white umbilical cord and with one snip separated son from mother.

Red remembered and then looked at his son now—a tall, lanky thirteen year-old boy who was not as far along the path to manhood as he thought he was, but also farther along the same path than Red wanted to concede. He felt his child slipping away.

Scott had already started down the trail to the lagoon without him.

“Hey Scott, wait up,” he shouted after his son. Scott kept ambling on.

“Scott,” he yelled louder until he saw the white cord, that connected Scott’s ears to his music, sway away from his body. Scott would never hear his father.

“Dammit,” Red said under his breath and moved faster to catch up.

It was normal nowadays, he guessed. His son was constantly connected: connected to his music, to his game system, to his phone, the television, his tablet, connected the whole drive down here. He was wired to the rest of the world by cables, cords, airwaves, and networks pulsing all around. Inescapable. Red felt them pulling his boy away.

Red was close to catching up to him now. “Scott!”

Scott stopped ahead.

“Scott!” Red repeated and gave him reasonable time to respond. During that time, Scott bounced with knees bent, shimmied his shoulders up and down three times, went up on the balls of his feet, dropped his chin to his chest and froze—seemingly in anticipation of a crescendo of noise that would no doubt break the trance, break the silence in his headphones, and propel his body into manic motion. Red had seen his son dance to this song before, though he’d never actually heard the song itself. He took one step closer. Red tapped his son’s now still shoulder and let his hand rest on it. “Scott.”

“Scott.”

Scott took the buds out of his ears. “What?”

“Hey, let’s make this hike without music. You know, listen to the sounds of nature.”

Scott shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “Sure.”

Scott was a good kid most of the time and, though Red had little frame of reference, he felt like he was a good father most of the time. They ambled down the trail together.

“Scott, about last night, you know your mother and . . .”

“Gross. C’mon, I’m thirteen.”

“Right.”

“Dad, why are we here?”

“I wish I knew, son, I’d tell you. But I’m not much of a philosopher.”

Scott shook his head, “I mean *here*. Why did we come to this place?”

“Oh. Your Grandma Shirl came from here, grew up here. This place is part of our roots, our blood, our history. I’ve never been before and I wanted to see it. I wanted us to see it.”

“Any of our family still here?”

“Grandma Shirl’s brother, Hezekiah, I think they mostly called him “Spider,” was the last I knew of. He died a few years ago.”

“Did you ever meet him?”

“No. Grandma Shirl never saw him after she left this place. That was more than forty years ago.”

“Why didn’t Grandma want to come with us?”

“You know how bull-headed Grandma Shirl is. When she left, she left for good. Never wanted to come back. Doesn’t even like to talk about her time here. I think she might have some regrets about that now.”

“It’s nice down here. Why’d she leave?”

Red bent down to tie his shoe. “It’s complicated. Things were different back then. My father, Gil, your grandfather, was white. Back then the town wouldn’t have tolerated a white man and a black woman together. And forget about a mixed child like me.”

“That’s so messed-up.”

“Yeah. It was pretty messed-up.”

“Did you ever meet him, your dad?”

“No. He died when I was young. He died right around here, in this lagoon. He drowned. I don’t think he ever even knew about me.”

“Man.”

“Scott . . . ”

“Yeah?”

“I know sometimes you might feel like I’m smothering you, but I didn’t have a dad, and I’m just figuring some of this stuff out as I go along . . . ”

“It’s cool. I understand. You’re doing fine, Dad.”

“Thanks. Hey, maybe we could come out here and go fishing.”

“Sure. I’d like that. But I got a question.”

“Fire away.”

“What’s a lagoon anyway?”

This made Red laugh, “Funny you should ask. It’s like a saltwater lake separated from the ocean by . . . ”

Before he could finish a cloud descended upon them, a thick cloud of mosquitos.

“What the . . . ” Scott screamed and swatted himself.

“Jesus Christ!” Red joined in.

It took nanoseconds for them to figure out that swatting was not going to be an effective defense. They took off, full sprint, for the car that was a good half-mile away at this point. Scott got there first, which was of little good seeing that Red had the keys. When Red got to the car, Scott was hopping around swatting, cursing, and waiting for him.

“Sorry.” Red fumbled at his keychain.

“Open the car!”

Red beeped them in and they slammed their doors shut. Hundreds of mosquitoes had poured into the car with them. Red jammed the key into the ignition, cranked the car, and gunned it.

“Go. Go. Go,” Scott yelled as Red did an immediate U-turn, spraying a gravel rooster-tail in their wake. Flooring the economy sedan, Red rolled down the windows, and the wind sucked all the mosquitoes out.

“Hell yeah!” Scott yelled.

Red slowed down and they drove along the thin, old asphalt road separating the lagoon on their left from the ocean to their right.

Red gasped. “Now we know why they call it Mosquito Lagoon.”

They laughed. And Red found himself glancing at his son off and on for the remainder of the drive.

* * *

A few days later, with their vacation coming to an end, Red made his way back to the lagoon, alone this time. He didn’t know what he expected to find. The temperature had dropped, the air had dried, and the mosquitoes were nowhere to be found. He brushed spiders and their webs out of his way as he walked down the narrow path through the palmetto scrub. When he got to the clearing, he found he had the lagoon all to himself.

Sunset was not far off, and the light lent everything it touched a soft pinkish-golden hue. Someone had dragged one of the heavy wooden picnic tables to the water’s edge, leaving half of the table in the water and half the table on the shore. The shore sloped slightly to meet the water and caused the table to angle down to the lagoon. The

pieces of cut-up fishing line and the three pale orange, dried-up bait shrimp on the table's top told him that the table's current position made it now more a bench to fish from than a picnic table.

Red took his time climbing up onto the table, and it took a few minutes of sitting before he lost the sensation that he was going slip off the table into the salty water. The lagoon opened out in front of him. Beyond the small clearing, mangroves lined its shore. The breeze was cool and the soothing sound of the not-so-distant ocean was at his back. A pod of dolphin fed and played in the water to the north. Schools of small fish would now and then break the water's surface all at once. A long line of pelicans dipped and glided above the water.

So this was it, the reason Red came here—to see the place where a man he never met, his father, Gil, had died. There was a sudden sharp pain in his hand. He looked down to see bloody fingers that, unbeknownst to him, had been playing with one of the dead shrimp. A sharp spine grew out of the shrimp's head, and it had punctured Red's finger. He tossed the now bloody shrimp into the lagoon and watched a fish dart up and grab it almost instantly before disappearing back into the dark depths. A loud splash pulled his eyes up in time to see a floating pelican crane his neck to the purple-orange sunset sky, and gulp a fish down its gullet.

Red smiled and said, "Thanks, Dad."

THREE O'CLOCK

It's 3 AM.

During the day, the Resort's lobby is a near-constant stream of guests pouring in and out. No one is checking into the Resort now. Behind the thirty-foot expanse of white marble-top that serves as the Resort's check-in counter, there sit but two employees who realize that being assigned to the late-shift is testament to the fact that the Resort's management has less than high expectations regarding their abilities. As they do every evening, the two fail to acknowledge the presence of the late-night cleaning staff pushing their carts and trudging past them on the other side of the long marble line. Three Latinos in charcoal grey coveralls move past the check-in area. A young Latina with a hitch in her gait leads the way. The rounded-corner, rectangular, white patch on her uniform reads, "Ismeralda."

A short, bald, disheveled, middle-aged man in a navy blue suit and wearing only one shoe clutches his groin and zombie-walks toward Ismeralda. He tries to shove her aside even though he is at least a car's length away from her. He stops and trembles like a volcano ready to blow. A stream of gurgling gibberish and saliva sputters from his mouth. He gags and seems destined to vomit. All three workers—Ismeralda, Arturo and León—freeze and think simultaneously, *Please, not on my floor*. The man doesn't and moves on, sways, stumbles and practically falls into the elevator. As soon as the elevator doors shut, they laugh among themselves.

"Did you see that guy?" León says.

"Oh, my god! He's crazy. And he smells like a diaper." Ismeralda laughs.

“Señor Borracho,” Arturo says as he mimics the drunk by jerking about with stiff legs and his hand pulling his pants up. They laugh and continue.

The resort has over three hundred rooms, three swimming pools, a workout room, a sauna, tennis courts, shuffleboard, three restaurants, four bars, an ice cream shoppe, a concierge station, valet parking, a business/computer room, two grand pianos, waterfalls and a driving range. But Ismeralda, Arturo and León have but one job—to keep the face of the Resort, the lobby, beautiful and clean.

The lobby, a massive corridor that runs the entire width of the Resort’s main building, has high ceilings with modern chandeliers. There are dozens of sofas with low tables and bubbling fountains with coins in them. The flooring is twelve-inch square, sand-colored tile except for a ten-foot-wide strip of pale green carpet, with a gold and pink floral design, that runs down the center of the lobby floor.

The revolving glass doors pour the guests into the marble-topped reception area at the center of the lobby. All pink and sweaty as a result of heretofore un-experienced levels of Florida heat and humidity, the guests funnel in to get the plastic cards that light up green dots on their door handles and gain them entrance to their homes for the next few days.

Hundreds of shoes and sandals will track in detritus from places near and far; thousands of fingers and palms smudge tabletops, glass and railings; millions of germs intrude and reside. The lobby is almost two football fields long. Every night, León wipes down countertops and tables in the lobby and then sweeps the tile. Every night, Ismeralda trails behind him, vacuuming the carpet. She wears a ten-gallon vacuum canister on her

back that connects to a hose she pushes and pulls back and forth over the carpet strip.

Every night, Arturo follows them both and mops all the tile flooring.

Though from different towns, Arturo and Ismeralda are both from Sonora, and sometimes tease León about being a dimwit from Oaxaca—as people from the North often do to people from the South. Also, León is almost thirty-three years old and much older than Ismeralda and Arturo, who are both nineteen, Ismeralda being exactly two months older than Arturo. León has worked at the resort for more than three years while Ismeralda and Arturo have each been at the resort less than a year.

The three reach the far west end of the lobby, where all the restaurants and bars are, and make ready to work their way toward the other end. León and Arturo both have sturdy grey plastic carts to carry the tools of their trade: brooms, mops, dusters, cleaners, rags, scrapers, dust pans, and yellow *Wet Floor* signs. Ismeralda needs only the stainless steel canister on her back and the fifty-foot bright orange extension cord that gives it power.

Ismeralda and Arturo wait as León makes his pass along the first section of tile with the wide, bright blue head of his push broom. He stops to wipe down and move some café tables. Then he continues sweeping up the debris.

“That guy was pretty drunk,” Ismeralda says.

“Yeah. Idiota. That’s stupid,” Arturo replies.

“You ever been drunk like that?” she asks.

“Only once. Back home, my cousin Mateo from Ensenada came to visit and snuck a jug of mezcal in his knapsack. We were twelve. I got very sick. Never again,” he tells her.

“I’ve never had a drop, except for at Mass.” Ismeralda says as she looks down and twirls her extension cord in response to Arturo.

“Here let me help you,” Arturo says and plugs in her extension cord.

“Thanks,” she says.

“You think León ever drinks like that?” she asks.

“Of course, he is from Oaxaca.” Arturo.

She laughs. “No, seriously.”

“No. I don’t think so.”

León has finished the first section and normally he shakes the broom’s dirt into the trash bag mounted to the front of his cart, but instead he whistles back to Ismeralda and Arturo. They look up and, once he holds Ismeralda’s gaze, León lifts the blue broom head up and shakes all the dirt and dust onto her carpet.

“Hey!” Ismeralda yells.

“Not so loud.” Arturo touches her shoulder.

León, still holding the broom over the carpet, pauses.

She looks to Arturo. “What’s grandpa’s problem?”

Arturo shrugs. “León leads us down the lobby. You know that. Respect. It matters to him.”

“Ay! I forgot,” she says, then apologizes to León, “lo siento Abuelo.”

León nods to her and goes back to work. Ismeralda and Arturo don't know it yet, but León sees it—they are falling in love. León smiles, pushes his broom and thinks of his wife and daughters back home in Mexico.

* * *

It's 3 AM.

Why not?

Why not inflict your best “Well, back home . . .” response to conversations both relevant and not?

Why not get into heated political debates based on biased third-hand misinformation you heard on some low-level AM radio station while driving to work last week?

Why not lose a battle with gravity as you topple off your barstool to seamlessly merge with the dark green short-pile carpet that does a good job of hiding stains and has long since resigned itself to a saturated, germ-ridden stickiness?

Why not attempt to spring up from the floor with barstool in-hand, only to inadvertently strike several standers-by with said barstool?

Why not foster an unpleasant uneasiness among nearby patrons as you try to form the words of an apology with hot, stinking, and too-close breath?

Why not realize that you've slightly shat yourself due to an alcohol-induced blariness meant to celebrate the illusion of freedom that this business trip has evoked?

Why not hit on the so-obvious-to-everyone-else-hooker and feel that her/his (?) flirtatious responses are sincere validations of your overall sexual appeal to the rest of the species?

Why not grope with leaden hands in a bathroom stall while forgetting the existence of wife, of child, of vows, of trust?

Why not awaken on the cold, dank floor beneath the urinals, missing a shoe, with trousers open and genitals exposed, bothered, sore, and sticky?

Why not stumble out into the too-bright, synthetic reality of the Resort's lobby one-shoed, shielding your eyes with one hand, holding up your pants with the other because you're too drunk to figure out how to fasten them?

Why not unleash an unintelligible barrage of slurred utterances upon the people cleaning the ground you walk upon?

Why not?

* * *

It's 3 AM.

The bathroom mirror shows me a lost soul. I stare at him staring at me. I rub at his eyes and poke at the bags under them. My hands glide across the bristle that covers his head. My hands go back and forth in an increasingly frenetic motion until his scalp becomes red and warm. He stops and stares at me. I stare back—and so begins a contest that could go on forever. Time passes. I break my stare. And he wins again. My fingers clutch and dig into his shorn skull, and I roar a mute, elongated scream over and over

again that, without noise, makes him look more and more ridiculous. I laugh at him laughing at me until it becomes uncomfortable for the both of us. The shower calls.

There was an interview with a famous director I saw on public television a couple years ago:

The interviewer asked, “How do you start your day?”

The director responded, “I take an ice cold shower every morning.”

The interviewer asked, “You like cold showers?”

The director responded, “No. I hate them. But after a cold shower, the day can only get better.”

I’m kind of the opposite, kind of the same. Every night after work I take a cold shower to shock myself out of the numbness. And I don’t mean “numbness” in some dramatic way like “Oh, my life is so horrible,” because it is not—although tonight was fairly awful. The cold water is a line, just like it is for that director. His line starts his day. My line ends mine. I stand motionless under the shower head and let the cold water bleed down on me. When the cold water first rolls off my head and travels down my spine, I shiver and shake, and in that instant I am restored. I’m clean of the filth of the bar. I’m refreshed, rejuvenated, and ready to relax and wind down.

I sit down on the couch. I have my one drink for the day—a double shot of scotch and a splash of distilled water. I stare at the flat panel screen that dominates my studio’s largest wall and try to bring on sleep with whatever non-paid programming I can find on at this time of night.

I shudder sometimes to think of the cliché I have become: a thirty-something actor/bartender, or is it now bartender/actor since I haven't auditioned or been in anything in more than two years now? It's been too long. I need to get back at it. I know at my core I am an actor, a good actor.

At the bar, I laugh at the tourist's dumbass jokes as if they were the funniest things I'd ever heard, even though I've heard them all at least a million times.

"Hey, buddy, you hear the one about the two Irish fags?"

"Uh, no," I lie and wait in anticipation.

"Sean Fitzpatrick and Patrick fits Sean. Ha. Get it?"

"Yeah, pretty funny," I laugh and act amused.

They think I'm their friend, their "hey buddy," when I actually despise most of them. They get drunk and so often they put down this area I grew up in and tell me how wonderful it is back where they're from. They think all there is to Florida is Mickey Mouse, Disney World, resorts and theme parks. They don't know about playing in acres of orange groves that have long since become "gated communities." They don't know about diving into springheads looking for black, prehistoric shark teeth. They don't know about stumbling upon a monster gator sunning itself and watching his eyes slowly slide open to stare at you. They don't know.

I laugh and pretend to be interested in what they have to say when all the while I want to tell them to go back to whatever crap town it is that spawns such idiots. But I don't. I am a good actor. I am a good bartender. I am their buddy. They like me and honestly believe that I like them.

*“Fie on’t! ah fie! ‘tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!”*

I was Hamlet in college! That it should come to this, indeed.

Tonight at the bar was something else. There are always protests at closing time. I get it, they’re on vacation and they want to “let the good times roll.” Really, I get it. But the law is the law and last call is last call. After two o’clock, no more alcohol. It’s not like it’s only the Resort that pays the fine, I’d get fined too. What the hell was that bald suit’s problem? What was it he said? Something like, “What kind of . . . one shits town . . . is this shit town?” Who knows? I could barely understand him. It would’ve been funny except he was dangerously wasted and then he got scary. It’s always the corporate types—so stressed, so unhappy, and so wound up. I wanted to kick him out at least twice tonight, but the Resort frowns on that kind of thing: “The Customer is King” and “We’re Selling Good Times” are their mantras. Maybe they should re-think their mission statement because the only thing that guy was “king” of was Asshole-ville and, believe me, no one around him was having a “Good Time.” Thank God he just kind of disappeared.

Another thing management may want to consider is changing the name of the Resort’s latest closing bar to something other than the “Why Not? Lounge.” The name only encourages idiots like that bald guy. “Why Not?” is the last thing assholes like him need to be thinking.

* * *

It’s 3 AM.

Earlier during the day, a sweaty, short, bald man in a navy blue suit got caught in the one of the Resort's revolving doors. More specifically, one of the wheels of his rolling luggage was hung up on the thick, grey rubber blade that runs along the vertical edge of each of the four glass panels that spin around to bring the guests in, and keep the outside out. Red-faced and cursing, the man jerked at the bag until the wheel ripped through the rubber blade and sent him sprawling onto the cold tile floor.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" He gathered himself up and looked around to glare off any of the onlooker's stares. "I need a drink," he muttered while wiping his brow and taking his place in line to check-in.

That was much earlier. All is quiet now in the Resort's lobby. Behind the check-in counter, two employees share a bag of chips from the vending machine. Powdered orange cheese sticks to their fingers, they wipe it off on their pants or suck it off their fingertips.

From outside, a dun field mouse worries at the rip in the revolving door's rubber blade and squeezes through to find himself in a roaring cavern of bright light, cold air, and strange smells. Pausing, the mouse goes up onto his hind legs and, nose twitching, looks about the place. From across the lobby, animal sounds cut above the din.

"Dude, did you hear what happened during Davey's shift?"

"Nah. What?"

"Oh man. This business guy, like, all sweaty, totally eats it onto the floor. Like, right in the middle of the lobby. He's all freaking out, like, 'Son-of-a-bitch! Son-of-a-bitch!' Flinging stuff around trying to get up. Everyone was just staring at him."

"No way!"

“Yeah, Davey said it was pretty funny. He wanted to laugh, but said the guy seemed like he might go crazy and kill you if you looked at him the wrong way.”

“You want the rest of these?” He says and gives his friend the bag of chips and then wipes the crumbs off on his pants.

The mouse smells something food-like amidst the cleaning residue on the floor and the chlorine wafting from the gurgling fountain nearby. He skitters across the vast expanse of tile toward the check-in counter. Running along the base of the counter, he finds himself on the carpet. And then, behind the counter, he sits and nibbles on some cheesy crumbs at the feet of the two employees. He can feel their heat.

“You know, it’s all chill here at night, but you know one thing that sucks about the late shift?”

“What?”

“Nothing ever happens.”

Through with the cheesy crumbs, the mouse goes up on his haunches and sniffs around for more morsels until he detects a hint of sweetness coming from nearby. Two feet away he finds its source, a card-sized grey box mounted under the countertop with a small red button that has a smudge of dried-up chocolate on it. The box is labeled “GRA-CO ALARM SYSTEMS” and above the chocolate-smudged red button are the words “TEST.”

THE SOUVENIR

The bus lurched, leaned, and jostled it from his hands. It slid, almost floating, through the thick tropical air. Joining the sand, dirt, and clods of orange clay trudged in by passenger feet, it bounced and hovered above the black rubber floor of the bus. Fingers fumbled, found, and then snatched it back up as if it were the key to their very being. The fingers rolled the dried-up, thumb-sized dead seahorse amongst themselves—back and forth, feeling him, flipping him over, examining every nook of his surface, considering every angle, and exploring every bumpy ridge. Such an odd creature, the seahorse.

He. Why did he, the young man, assume the seahorse was a he? Was it because the young man wanted him to be? Needed him to be? Was the young man alone and simply wanted a friend with him in his time of need?

Even dead and dried, the seahorse seemed stoic, unflappable, and wise. His hide was rough with ridged rings that ran the length of his body from the neck down. The hard lines of the seahorse's snout provided a nice contrast to the curves that made up the rest of his body—giving him a graceful, yet strong appearance. Kyle, the young man, wondered if he, the seahorse, had experienced the wonderment of giving birth.

Even though Kyle was only twenty-four years old, high school was a hazy recollection for a variety of reasons: the discovery and consumption of beer and marijuana, sports, fast food jobs, parental confrontations, jerk-hole friends, unobtainable girls who liked him but not “that way,” being the class clown, lack of challenge in the classroom,” et cetera. But some things did surface through the mist of memory: Stanley

Miller's primordial soup, Camus's *The Stranger*, "Où est la bibliothèque?", Crispus Attucks, agricola-agricolae-agricolum, Salvador Dali's flaming giraffes, trisomy 21, black holes, simple machines, and the fact that male seahorses were alone in the animal kingdom in their ability to give live birth as the male of their species.

Kyle remembered that the male seahorse did not merely sit on eggs like the male penguins did. No, the male seahorse carries the young in its belly for the full gestation process until the father writhes, arches his back, and then thrusts the young out from a hole in its abdomen. Kyle's eyes focused on the creature and he pressed on the seahorse's petrified paunch.

Hunched over, looking down on the black rubber floor, Kyle thought of himself swollen with pregnancy—his hands clutching and rubbing his belly in disbelief and wonder while a life stirred within him. What would it be like? His mind switched back to his present situation. Tears welled in his eyes. With blurred vision, he looked at the seahorse he held. Kyle stared at the puckered eyes and hoped they were the only ones that witnessed his sins.

"Dammit." He wiped at his eyes and sat up. The sun was rising, and God's fingers poked through the silhouetted canopy of the rainforest to reveal the green and rock and cliff and jungle that roiled outside the bus as it slithered up and around the mountainous roads. Outside the bus a din arose as howler monkeys lived up to their names, land crabs crunched under the wheels, parrots screeched, branches scratched and slapped at the bus's roof and sides, and the bus groaned and clicked as it whined up and around the mountains—taking him away, taking him back to Florida, taking him home.

* * *

The trip to Costa Rica had been Kyle's first major surf trip and his first time outside the country. A trip to Costa was pretty much a rite of passage for surfers who grew up around the Inlet and Kyle had heard enough "Dude, you gotta go there" to make him want to take the trip just to avoid ever hearing it again. There were countless tales of great waves, beautiful scenery, the "pura vida" lifestyle, hot girls, cheap eats, friendly local ticans, inexpensive cabins to sleep in, and wild times—he wanted some tales of his own.

Things were going good at Inlet Charlie's Surf Shop, but the day after day dealing with tourists and selling the "surf" image to people was wearing on him. Everyday, people came in who had never even touched a surfboard, but wanted to buy the "coolness" the surfing image provided. Kyle had been promoted to manager a few months ago, which nearly doubled his paycheck, but also increased his responsibilities around the shop and required him to be more grown up.

On his way to work, Kyle pushed his skateboard up to the beach ramp to look at the waves. He needed to post his first surf report of the day: two to three feet, diminishing swell, consistent light offshore wind, the surf would probably be best on the outgoing tide a couple hours away. He turned and skated a half block back to the surf shop.

The door was unlocked and Kyle walked in.

"Hey, looks decent out there. You surf this morning?" It was Charlie the owner, a local legend surfer and shaper. He was rubbing his hair dry with a towel. "It was fun over by Esther Wall."

“Nah, I woke up too late.” Kyle took his backpack off and parked it, along with his skateboard, behind the register.

Charlie left a trail of wet footprints as he went to the door to flip on the lights and turn the “We’re Open” sign around. On the way back, he wrapped the towel around his waist and then pulled his baggies off from underneath before putting on some dry shorts. For a sixty-something year old man, Charlie was in pretty good shape. Kyle hoped he would be like Charlie when he got older.

Charlie asked, “What’s up lately? Seems like ages since I’ve seen you out in the water. When was the last time you surfed?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Couple weeks ago? Maybe.” Kyle looked at the floor behind the register and pushed his foot around the dust bunnies under the display case.

“You missing that girl of yours? You guys have been going out a while now. What is it? A year or two?” Charlie put a shirt on and then plunged his feet, one by one, into his flip-flops.

“Almost two and a half years now.” Kyle answered.

Charlie took his longboard off the floor and put in the racks. “Hell, you’re practically married.”

“Yeah . . . I know.” Kyle hung his head down.

“Hey, I was just kidding. Why the long face? Lola’s a keeper as far as I can tell. I’ve watched all you kids around here grow up. You two are some of the good ones.”

Charlie walked over to put the bank in the register and then mussed Kyle’s hair. “Don’t overthink it. You miss her, right?”

Kyle looked up and grinned. “Yeah.”

“Well then, go see her.”

“What?”

“Life’s short. Go see her. You’ve never been to Costa right?”

“No.”

“Well, you gotta...”

“I know, I know. I gotta go there.” Kyle replied.

“Well, do it.” Charlie said.

“What, like now?”

Charlie laughed. “No, not this instant. But book a flight today. Go see your girl. Catch some waves. Enjoy life instead of moping around here.”

“But what about . . .”

“What about what? The shop? Don’t worry about it. Who do you think started this whole thing? I think I can handle it for a couple of weeks. Go get some waves, have some fun while you’re still young.”

“But . . .”

“Just do it.” Charlie pulled four hundred dollars from the register and pushed it into Kyle’s hands.

Kyle was surprised by the gesture. “I can’t.”

“Consider it a bonus. Catch a couple lined-up lefts for an old man. Down a few Imperials for me and we’ll call it even.” Charlie smiled and then headed out the door.

* * *

The moments before the departure to Costa Rica had been mostly quiet and mostly uneventful—mostly. Passengers nuzzled into their seats and made ready for the three-hour flight from Florida to the “Switzerland of Central America.” Bags were stowed, heads were rested, and all was well. Then, right before the stewardess was about to close the hatch, they burst into the scene. Kyle instantly dubbed them the Three Amigos. They were loud, arrogant, had an aura of self-entitlement about them, and were wearing all things “surf” from head to toe.

In the lead, was the one Kyle named “Alpha Dog” who had stereotypically long straw-like blond hair sticking out from underneath his beanie cap and a puffy air of bravado that he wore like the confidence of a boy playing at being a man. Alpha Dog shuffled down the aisle with his two friends in tow.

“Dude, only a few more hours and we’re there. Are you ready for it?” Alpha Dog said to his posse as they approached Kyle’s section. They were a walking cliché and exuded the “surfer dude” image that nauseated Kyle and made him hesitate to tell people he surfed. *Please keep walking*, Kyle thought—to no avail. The Three Amigos shoved their backpacks into overhead and plopped into the seats in front of Kyle, making his spine tighten and his jaw clench tight. *Great. Three hours with these idiots.* He instantly regretted his “no technology” ban for the trip. Noise-cancelling headphones and some music would make a welcome alternative to the idiotic babbling of Alpha Dog and his crew.

Thankfully, the steward came down the aisle offering headphones for passengers to plug into the airline's canned music that streamed from the armrest portals of their seats. A mere two dollars bought Kyle hope—a hope left unrealized as the tinny, crappy connection to the radio voices, pop music, moronic sport shows, and stalely delivered world news reports offered little relief from the loud, seemingly scripted exchanges of the Three Amigos.

“So you think you can handle it? I don't know about you, but I'm going to show those beaners how it's done.” Taunting them, Alpha Dog was establishing his superiority as someone who'd been there before and rubbing it in the snouts of the two newbies he brought along to buoy him. From between the seats in front of him, Kyle could see footage that looked like a wipeout compilation from one of Costa Rica's heavier breaks, Boca Negra.

Alpha Dog pointed at the waves crashing on the screen of his laptop and repeated, “Think you can handle it?” just as a surfer went over the falls and surfaced in the whitewater gasping for breath and clutching at his broken surfboard. The two sheep offered hesitant nods. “Hah. We'll see brah, we'll see. Wait until we get to Jaco.” Alpha Dog's voice trailed off as he became more fixed upon what was playing on the screen. Kyle wondered if he could handle it.

Jaco. Lola had been in Costa Rica for a couple months living and studying Spanish in the capital, San José, as part of an immersion program her university offered. Jaco was the closest break to San José and, like that of most other surfers visiting here, Kyle's surf adventure in Costa Rica would start there. Kyle checked the webcams for

Jaco everyday with the hope of catching a glimpse of Lola surfing on the days he knew she would be there.

There were always shots on the web of Florida boys in Jaco just killing it: tucked into perfect little barrels, fins blown out the back of the wave with buckets of water spraying, and solid slob-air silhouettes. They made it look so fluid, so easy. The wave almost looked playful and fun. What the images failed to convey was the speed, force, and unbridled power of a wave that collected its due.

By the time of Kyle's visit, Lola was close to having the wave wired and quickly made the paddle to the outside, while Kyle was still paddling around on the inside. Kyle struggled through the surf and even got pushed down and pinned to the ocean's floor a few times. Lola's concerned gaze and a hoot of congratulations greeted him when Kyle finally popped through the last wave of a particularly large set of waves.

"You made it." Lola splashed some water at him. "You had me worried there for a little bit."

Kyle was still breathing heavy. "Yeah, I had me worried too."

"I can guess, but what happened?"

Kyle sat up on his board. "I got my ass kicked."

Lola laughed.

He did it. He struggled for two pride-filled days that allowed him to feel comfortable enough to suggest moving on. He saved face, but knew that Jaco kicked his ass. And that was just the wave. The overall scene was unsettling for him, like Daytona Beach during Spring Break, but with a lawless, "anything goes" Wild West feel to it.

Drugs, clubs, teenage prostitutes, and a live-fast-die-young surf tourist culture that milked the surfers and held many of them in orbit around a false sense of consequence-free debauchery. Some surfers never left. This was not the Costa Rica Kyle had come for.

The only other place they went, Tamarindo, was much better. The time here had been good, but now it was the night before he went home. Kyle peeled back the towel that covered the wooden bowl they used as an ice bucket. He tried to be quiet about it, plucking the ice, cube by cube from the bowl. Lola was still asleep—he couldn't sleep.

Each cube scratched loud against the others. His mind envisioned moaning glaciers shedding their skin. Each cube existed as interdependent with the others, and the slightest movement of one had audible, reactionary repercussions, both predictable and otherwise, on the other cubes.

Lola was a light sleeper in random ways he'd yet to figure out. Case in point, the soft dull glow of the hall light streaming into the bedroom back home would rouse her from the deepest sleep, but he could flash a camera in order to capture a particularly wry expression on her sleeping face, and there wouldn't be the slightest reaction. A cicada once got into the bedroom at night and buzzed loudly while he chased it around—but not a stir from a sleeping Lola; but the brushing of pages turned would earn him a dead-arm slap at his general vicinity.

"Dammit," he muttered under breath. He blew on his fingertips in an attempt to warm them enough to avoid the ice cubes sticking to his fingers in unwanted ways, but still the topmost cubes crackled and clung upon contact. Kyle recouped, and made ready

to restart the process of extraction. Lola stirred abruptly, and then flipped into a more comfortable position.

A pause. Then, as slow as evolution, he pulled an ice cube from the bowl . . . and then another. Steady hands. Everything slowed down. A clock in his head ticked like a metronome from painful, pleasant, pubescent piano lessons best forgotten, but impossible to do. The teacher's hip melding against his as they sat on the piano bench with its warm compartment of sheet music contained beneath. Tight polyester Capri pants. Sleeveless blouse.

Her left arm draped over his shoulders helping his hands and fingers into proper keyboard position with the side of her breast rubbing against his ribs. Every Good Boy Does Fine Always. Every good boy does fine always.

Kyle focused on finishing the job. There was a slight rustle from the bed. He snatched a cube like a frog catching a fly from the air and, for a millisecond, success. Then a sharp cracking, from some hidden void of an ice cavern, caused the glacier to crumble in on itself. Travesty. His eyes alone moved to the bed. Her back was to him now and she was on her side with the now familiar lines of her body a source of warmth for him. No motion. No recognition. She was still asleep, no worries. Travesty averted.

With ever increasingly frozen red numb fingers, he pulled out and then slid, one by one, ice cubes down into the earthenware mug. With the utmost care, he poured the warm dark rum onto the active ice that crackled with delight. He squeezed and dropped in a lime wedge. He was already packed and ready to go.

She had told him, "Wake me up before you leave, okay?"

“Sure,” he had told her. He knew he wouldn’t.

He left her to sleep while he went to the beach one last time.

The rum warmed him and made his movements molasses. The ice tinkled in the mug that he slurped at to keep the rum from spilling. His flip-flops slapped along the path to the beach in less than rhythmic response due to the hitch in his gait—his leg still hurt. The wear and tear of surfing two long sessions twice a day, everyday, had taken its toll on his hamstring and knee. The night sun seeped through the passing clouds. He could see it now, the bright white of the crashing water running a line through the night.

The first sight of surf from the path was always tempting because the waves in front of the path could look so good, but he’d never seen anyone out there—ever. Upon closer inspection, during daylight hours, the reason was simple enough to understand as the rocks clearly conspired beneath the surface and on occasion gave evidence of their intentions when the shifting water exposed their jagged form to the air.

He studied the wave, as he was sure many had, pushed on by the thought that on the “right tide” with the “right swell” and the “right moon,” you might be able to skirt over the rocks and make it through what was called a “bone yard section” at most breaks. But in two weeks, he’d never seen the wave look that “right” and he got the impression that not even the locals had witnessed a scenario that would siren them into the break. Still, the wave was fun to watch.

He felt a warm raspy lick on the back of his leg. “Hey, Loosey. Good girl.” He squatted down and let her lick her hellos all over his face and neck beard. There were dogs all over the place in Costa Rica, most traveling in packs, scouring the land for food

and such, but some went solo to peddle the tourist trade. Others would latch on to you and be your dog while you visited their fair land. Loosey was one of the dogs that latched on to you.

A mutt with ridgeback in her blood, she had disappeared a couple of days ago. Kyle rifled through the pockets of his shorts and found something he'd stored for her. He pulled out some brittle turkey-jerky and held it to her muzzle while she wolfed it down with long yawning, smacking motions that spoke of the meat's dryness. Her warm tongue on his hands felt good. "Where you been? Let's go for a walk." He headed north with his friend.

Loosey was a tawny bitch with dark rimmed ears. She nipped at his heels, and he knew what she wanted. He found an acceptable piece of wood and threw it into the sea and then sat in the soft coarse sand. Moonlight showed her tussling in the froth to gain purchase of the stick. The foaming water pushing forth and pulling back.

Kyle liked that she was still playful, despite the apparent rigors of her day-to-day existence. She leaned back on her haunches, barking and lunging in calculated but failed attempts. Kyle smiled. Loosey advanced into the surf. The whitewater pulled and hid the stick until it popped up, never where anticipated, jiggling and jogging in an erratic choreography conducted by the sea.

The water pulled the stick toward an outcropping of rocks. "Get it girl." He stumbled to his feet. Stick in her mouth, she fought a rip current, floated over a rocky section and scratched her way to his open arms on shore. He led her back to his mug of

rum and took his place in the sand. Loosey sat next to Kyle, she was panting with the stick at her feet, and he knew she wanted another throw. Loosey could do this for hours.

Kyle wanted her to rest, and he rubbed her from neck to backside over and over again, misting water off her short fur. “Good girl. Good girl.” Loosey sat down and licked at her paws. He put his drink down and rustled her neck. He paused. “I’m gonna miss you. You know?” Loosey looked up and licked at his hands, egging him on. “Sorry,” he said.

“Let’s go to the log.” She snapped up from the sand while Kyle floundered to do the same. They navigated north toward the Tamarindo river mouth. Flip-flops in his back pocket, he trudged along while she nipped at his heels before sprinting ahead and circling back to do it all again. “Hey, get back here.” He laughed. Up ahead, she goaded a phantom hidden inside a pile of seaweed and then tore at the mass, flinging bits of wrack into the air. Kyle laughed again. “You knucklehead.”

She returned to settle back to a patient trot by his side. Almost to the log, Loosey nudged Kyle up the mound to where the log rested. He sat down in the sand, back against the log, face to the sea. A look into his mug showed a white ghost remembrance of ice floating in the dark sea of rum. He gulped it all down, almost choking on it. Kyle watched the waves roll in. They were looking better and better. Lola would get some good ones tomorrow.

Kyle wished he could stay in Costa Rica longer, maybe forever. Tomorrow he’d be back home, the next day he’d be working in the surf shop, and a few weeks later Lola

would be back at school. She'd graduate. She'd probably move in with him, look for a job. They'd settle down and start a life together.

Kyle looked out into the thunderous ocean, got back into the moment, let loose a heavy sigh of satisfaction, and stroked Loosey's wet fur—the perfect ending to a perfect trip. He stretched his arms along the line of the log and dropped his head back to stare up at the stars. Thin clouds swept across the face of the moon. Calm. This was what he had wanted Costa Rica to be. Jaco was a world away.

A few minutes passed. A voice bellowed out behind him, cutting through the moment. Kyle snapped his head down from the sky and twisted around to bring his eyes toward the noise. Stumbling out of the darkness came a stranger Kyle immediately remembered—Señor Borracho.

Kyle first saw Señor Borracho a few days ago. After a full morning of surfing Playa Langosta, before the wind chopped up the faces of the waves, Kyle and Lola, both sore from the morning session, decided to put a period to surfing for the day and just hang out like regular tourists. There was a beach bar they had passed earlier that morning on the walk to Langosta. Cantina del Mer was painted on an old longboard that hung above the gateway to the bar, and the place looked clean enough, so they decided to give it a whirl after showering and putting their boards up back at the cabina.

They showered together to make the most of the limited amount of hot water. The shower could have possibly been romantic except that the shower stall was barely big enough for one person. They poked and jabbed each other while trying to clean off. Afterwards, Lola sat naked on the bed drying her hair. “You know, my shoulders are

really sore. Maybe you could massage them? Just for a little bit before we go eat.

Please?”

He couldn't tell if she was joking or serious because she was borrowing so heavily from one of his signature moves.

“Just for a little bit. I promise.” Out of her mouth, but his words verbatim.

By the time he broke out of thought and looked at her, she was lying down face first, eyes closed, arms in a stick ‘em up position, with legs positioned apart just so. “Just for a little bit. My shoulders are so sore. C’mon.”

He could see an ever so slight smile being held back.

She said, “C’mon, just for a little bit.”

He looked down on her tanned Venus dimples and the patch of fine golden hair that resided there, and decided to play along.

“I’m really, really hungry, but okay. Just for a little bit,” Kyle said and then straddled the backs of her legs. He pressed and pushed his thumbs along the outline of her spine, from her neck all the way down her backside, swooping out along the lines of her shoulders up top and pushing down firmly on her lower back before kneading across her hips, over and over again. He bent down to kiss her nape and thought about her body possibly being the only one he’d touch for the rest of his life.

The sex and surf combined made them ravenous, and after a cold shower they were off to Cantina del Mer. Being midday, the heat bore down on them. Florida could be hot, but his was a different type of hot—a type of hot that found you, followed you and fed on you. The miniscule relief shade brought pulled the body like gravity. You found

yourself taking the shortest line to any semblance of relief. Their bodies were so well trained by the sun, that Kyle and Lola moved in unspoken unison to any inkling of shade.

Walking hand in hand down Sweet Street, Kyle's mind tested the notion of them as man and wife. Kyle called it Sweet Street because the first time he ventured out into Tamarindo on his own, he walked down the street and smelled a rich, sugary sweetness in the air. He was confused as he looked around and saw no bakery, no candy store, not even a restaurant or coffee shop.

When he got back to the cabina that day, he asked Lola about the sweet smell, and she laughed. "I did the same thing my first time on that street. It's molasses. They spread it on the dirt road to help keep the dust out of out of their shops. The molasses dries hard as rock, and the shopkeepers hose it down each morning to keep it working."

His response, "Aha."

Hot and sweaty, they finally made it to the Cantina del Mer. Where the cantina ended and the beach began, tables and chairs spilled out onto and into the sand. The dappled shade of the palm trees provided an oasis from the unabated brightness and heat that pulsed in the direct sunlight found toward the ocean. They sat out at a table in the sand, under the shade of a palm tree, and enjoyed ceviche, rice and beans, ceballitos, fish tacos, and a bucket of ice-cold Imperial beers with wedges of lime.

Beyond the shade in front of them the sun beat down. Not more than ten yards away from Kyle and Lola were two palm trees that offered the last bit of shade before the beach. Between the two trees there was a makeshift bar made of two-by-fours, around ten feet long, that spanned the distance between the trees. The boards were topped with

scraps of plywood that served as the bar's tabletop. Slouched over the bar-top were Señor Borracho and his two compadres.

A motley and rough-looking crew they were—shirtless, shoeless, grimy and swollen with drink. Señor Borracho's body language made it clear that he was the leader. He appeared strong and was lean except for an impressive gut that looked like he'd swallowed a basketball. Their bar-top was littered with empty beer bottles, chicken bones, spilled rice, empty cups, and flies that flew on and off what little food was left on their plates.

Lola sat across from Kyle, with her back to the ocean, and hadn't seen the drunks behind her.

"Hey. What are you looking at?" Lola scarfed some chips and salsa verde.

"Oh, nothing." Kyle's eyes flicked back to her—but not for long.

There was a loud clattering of bottles and Kyle looked over to see an argument bubbling at Señor Borracho's table. His friends were laughing at him, which clearly fueled his fury. Kyle understood little of the Spanish Señor Borracho yelled, as his outbursts were short, abrupt, slurred, and sounded fragmented. Kyle was, however, able to pick out the more and more readily used English "Fock. You," that seemed to serve as either punctuation or filler for when Señor Borracho's drunken mind was struggling for ammo to fire.

All the cantina had taken notice, including Lola. "Kyle, stop staring," she said.

His eyes flicked over to the bar to see the bull of a barkeep rise from his stool behind the cash register and reach for something underneath it.

“Fock You! Fock You!” Señor Borracho spat out to each of his mates separately. The two friends were no longer laughing at what, moments earlier, had probably been a familiar display of Señor Borracho’s drunkenness. But now a line had been crossed, now a switch had been flipped, now concern showed on their faces as they sat still, apparently waiting for the storm to subside.

“Kyle, stop staring!” Lola whispered as she shrunk into her chair.

The tirade, reached a crescendo. Señor Borracho’s hand raised a beat up machete over his head. Back home the sight of a machete in a public place would certainly arouse a stir, but here, where even the children were deft in the everyday tool’s deployment, it wouldn’t even be noticed except that Señor Borracho was waving it around with a solid sense of its potential to dismember.

In that moment their eyes locked, and Kyle could feel himself becoming a new target for Señor Borracho’s rage. The blade was worn charcoal gray except for a thin line of gleaming sharpness that ran the length of the knife’s blade—a blade that was now being wagged at Kyle from across the sand.

“Fock you, Gabacho!” Señor Borracho screamed at him.

Gabacho? The Mexican slang for “whitey” was so out of place here, so unexpected—it threw Kyle off into distraction, threw him back to Florida, threw him back to DeLand, threw him back to the only other time he had been called a Gabacho. It was years ago, at a gas station off Old New York Avenue. He had gone in to pay for his fill-up and after paying, not realizing someone had lined up behind him, he backed up,

full force into a tray of four obscenely large fountain drinks that exploded into a mass of orange, brown and lime green fizziness that settled into a puddle on the floor.

Embarrassment paralyzed him and kept him from saying “I’m sorry.” Instead, he turned and started for the door. He heard “Pinché Gabacho” muttered behind his back. Kyle turned back and found a middle-aged Mexican man whose light grey tee shirt, bearing the logo of a local fern nursery, had been splattered dark in places by the explosion. The man’s pants had gotten wet as well.

“Lo ciento,” Kyle managed to finally say to the man that day.

Kyle’s mind came back to the cantina. Señor Borracho said, “Fock You Gabacho.” And the machete’s blade remained fixed on Kyle’s head.

“Jesus Kyle, let’s get out of here. I told you not to stare.”

The Bull from behind the bar lifted the hinged section of the bar and emerged brandishing his own weapon—a small aluminum bat that had probably been all blue originally, but now was worn to bright raw aluminum at its head. Kyle recognized it as the type sports fishermen use to club to death large fish, like marlin, that they land into their boats—bright, red blood pooling and draining from the boats’ white decks.

Señor Borracho’s tablemates noticed the Bull heading their way and skittered off like ghost crabs. “Out,” the Bull shouted. Señor Borracho looked his way and dropped his arm, but refocused his gaze on Kyle long enough to offer one last “Fock You” before waddling off toward the beach, ignoring the threat of the beer bottles the Bull hurled into his wake.

That was a few days ago, but now Señor Borracho groaned at him. Kyle could see Señor Borracho's mind struggle to the point of recognition, could see Señor Borracho's fingers looped around the handle of a jug of rum while the other hand balanced the equation with its grip around the black handle of the machete used to punctuate the air at the Cantina a few days ago.

Loosey growled, barked, and lunged back and forth toward Señor Borracho. Kyle stumbled to his feet. As he stood up, Kyle could see that Señor Borracho now remembered him.

"Fock. You. Gabacho." Señor Borracho's smiled, buoyed himself with a big swig of rum, wiped his mouth, brought the blade up, and staggered toward Kyle. "Fock. You."

Loosey made a run at him and yelped as Señor Borracho brought the blade down and cut her in half. Kyle didn't even have time to process what had just happened, but realized the same could happen to him soon. Closer now, the bloody blade raised again, Señor Borracho launched himself at Kyle. Shocked, cold with sweat, head pounding, Kyle could do nothing but fall away from the blade coming down on him.

"Kisssshhh," the blade whispered into the sand. The momentum of the miss pulled Señor Borracho down and during his struggle to right himself, Kyle kicked out at Señor Borracho's legs just enough to topple him. And down he went.

When Kyle got up, he realized Señor Borracho was dead. The way his head wedged against the log, ear mashed into his shoulder, left little doubt that Señor Borracho's neck had broken when he hit the log. Kyle looked around. The thick, ten-foot-

long log, that was parallel to the shoreline, sat atop a small peak on the beach near the place where the river mouth joined the sea.

If Kyle propped Señor Borracho up against the log, the sunrise joggers and walkers would probably assume that he was sleeping or passed out drunk. Even in death, Señor Borracho emanated an air of badass that would keep gringos away. But a local, a tican, might go up and give him a nudge. “Wake-up, wake-up,” first whispered, and then spoken with more firmness until the tican realized the gravity of the situation.

Kyle sat on the log and stared out on the Pacific. The groundswell that began far away in Africa was picking up. The light of the full moon showed a building swell that was reaching its peak—the waves would be good tomorrow, maybe epic. He dropped his chin. Less than twelve hours earlier he had sat on this log, with aching knee, watching Lola surf La Casita on the other side of the river mouth.

The waves then had been solid four to six-foot faces made oil-glass by the soft offshore winds the afternoon brought. Three, maybe four, other surfers were out there with her, but she sat on the peak and owned it. Wave after wave, the break favoring mainly lefts that day, she’d drop in, set rail on a deep bottom turn and then shoot up to the lip to try a variety of maneuvers: roundhouses, floaters, laid back cut-backs, even a little air now and then—putting together at least two to three solid moves on each wave.

This was what you dreamed about growing up in Florida, something the Inlet back home rarely offered—a lined-up, machine-like wave that was consistently the same, wave after wave, set after set.

Lola was taking full advantage of the opportunity to work on tricks and turns, repeatedly under nearly identical circumstances. Usually he was in the water with her, but now watching her from shore, he had to acknowledge something that had lingered on the fringes of his mind for some time now. He had to acknowledge that she was better than he was.

By the time Lola paddled in and got out of the water, a group of tourists were waiting to talk to her. Lola took her first step out of the water, and they were huddled around her. She laughed and spoke to them for a while before waving good-bye and paddling across the river mouth back to the log.

“You see those lefts?” She beamed.

“I know. You were looking good out there. Solid.”

She shook the water out of her ears. “So good. Wave after wave.”

“What was that crowd on the beach about?”

She laughed and shook her head. “They thought I was a pro. Can you believe it?”

Kyle laughed. “Yeah, I can. You were surfing like one.”

They sat looking at the waves, and then he found himself staring at her. “Hey, look what I found.” He held up a dried-out seahorse.

“Cool. Where’d you find it?” He handed it to her.

“I was sitting here running my feet through the sand, watching my hot pro-surfer girlfriend, when my toes hit something.”

“You never see these in Florida.”

“I know.”

She flipped the seahorse around, gave it a thorough examination and handed it back to him. “C’mon Gimp, let’s go for a swim.”

Before going to the water with her, Kyle had put the seahorse in a crevice at the end of the log with the intention of picking it up after their swim, but forgot about it.

Now, sitting on the log with Señor Borracho dead at his feet, Kyle remembered the seahorse. He fumbled around to find it. Once he did, Kyle held the seahorse and looked to the petrified fish as if expecting an answer, some advice, some solace. The golden brown, sugary, buttered flour smell of baked goods drifted down from the bakery back behind the log and brought Kyle back to his present predicament: what to do with Señor Borracho?

The maids, shaking sand out of doormats outside the hotel, had probably seen him on the path to the beach and perhaps others would see him as he walked back to the cabina. What to do? Looking at his watch, he saw it was 3 AM, only a few hours before his bus left. The smell of baked goods grew stronger, wafting down across King Alberto’s pond toward the beach. Maybe that was it. Only 100 feet or so behind the log was King Alberto’s pond and by default, King Alberto.

King Alberto was a bit of a local legend. He was a 16-foot, yellowish crocodile that at one time prowled the river mouth. Kyle, Lola and countless others had paddled across it to get to La Casita and the more popular Playa Grande beyond it. Far more aggressive than their alligator cousins in Florida, crocodiles like King Alberto were genetically more motivated to attack humans.

About six years ago, realizing that the croc was scaring off surfers and tourists alike, due to his near-daily excursions into the ocean, the locals agreed to kill him. Then they changed their minds. The story goes that a local American expatriate heard about the plan to kill the croc and gave fruit to another idea—an idea of capture.

Kyle thought the guy must have been a Floridian and he could imagine how it went down. The ex-pat probably said something like, “You see, back home we have parks like Gatorland and Gatorville filled with hundreds of alligators. The tourists love it. They like the danger of getting close to something so primitive and dangerous.” He imagined the ticans were hesitant but eventually saw the wisdom in the idea.

The legend says that it took twenty men and two days to capture King Alberto with three men getting injured and one eventually dying from a single blow of the croc’s mighty tail. After finally snaring him and wrapping his jaws shut, the locals needed two pick-up trucks to drag the beast to the pond where they rolled a chain link fence around to keep him in.

“That’s bullshit,” Todd said. Todd was a grizzled, constantly coked-up expat Kyle and Lola had run into several times at the Italian-owned burrito shop on the way to Langosta. “Total bullshit, dude. I was here back then, and that’s not how it went down at all. That’s some bullshit story to excite the tourists.” He sniffed hard and rubbed at his gums. “They just rolled the fence around that pond and left an opening toward the river. Then a goat. They staked a freaking goat on that little island in the pond and just waited ‘til the fucker went in there to eat it. Closed it up. End. Of. Story. No epic battle. No carnage. That’s just bullshit, man.”

However King Alberto got there, the fact remained that he was there now and that the fenced-in pond was looking like a good place to put Señor Borracho. But could Kyle do it? His knee still ached. With time slipping away, he had to try. How would Kyle get Señor Borracho over the fence? Could he get him over the fence? Worst-case scenario, he'd cover Señor Borracho up down there in hopes that it would delay his discovery.

The line from the log to the pond sloped downhill, and he noticed what looked like a bit of concrete, a manmade obtrusion on the far and deeper end of the pond. It looked like something Kyle could use, either to get Señor Borracho into the pond or at least something to hide him behind. Plus, the concrete was farther away from the bakery, farther away from the people on the beach, and it offered hope. Kyle just needed to get Señor Borracho down there.

First light was not far off. He had to get moving. He grabbed Señor Borracho's feet and jerked him away from the log. Kyle winced, his leg buckled, and he lowered himself to the beach's sand. He needed to move slower, make his actions more controlled, and avoid stressing his knee as much as possible. He had to do it, and do it soon.

From the ground, using his upper body, Kyle pulled the dead man away from the log and went about pushing him to the slope on the backside of the log. It was slow work in the soft sand, but as he pushed the body farther from the ocean side, the earth was more like the hard-packed soil you found in open areas away from the beach, and pushing became more like rolling.

Kyle put his head down and pushed and crawled, and pushed and crawled until the body slipped away and he fell face forward into the earth. Once back on his hands and knees, he watched the body roll faster and faster, limbs flailing away on occasion, bumping down the slope and toward King Alberto's pond.

The rustle of high grass and the loud chinking sound of the fence being struck announced the arrival of Señor Borracho at the pond's edge. "Oh shit," Kyle whispered to himself. He was just as concerned about the ruckus attracting the attention of the humans as he was about the sound rousing the interest of a certain mighty croc.

* * *

Kyle found that people living outside Florida often seemed to have this vision of Florida being riddled with alligators—occupying every golf course, filling every body of water, sunning themselves all over the place, playing in swimming pools, and eating pets. Though gators weren't *everywhere* like the tourists thought, they were around and Kyle had run across them several times when he was growing up.

The small lake Kyle grew up on, outside of Orlando, had zero alligators, and if one ever did make its way into Woodlake, the neighbors were quick to get rid of it. But the bodies of water in the woods and groves surrounding the neighborhood were a different story. As children, Kyle and his friends would romp through the surrounding area, claiming the area as their own to fish, explore, and create new worlds. Almost always fun were rotten orange wars where the moldy rinds held in the heat of decomposition until impact, when the rotten orange would splatter the target's body with stinking sweet and sour, fermented pulp.

During one of these heated battles, Kyle had his most memorable run-in with a gator. His friend, JK, was hiding in a grapefruit tree when Kyle spied him and snuck up behind him. The shot was difficult, but the rotten grapefruit hit JK squarely in the back of the head, showering him with the gross muck the leathery rind had contained so well. Kyle had somewhat better aim than JK did, but when it came to foot speed, JK was a cheetah and Kyle an injured gazelle.

Kyle tore off running into the groves until he realized he was in a part of the groves they usually stayed clear of. It was where the caretaker lived, and he would just as soon shoot rock salt at you as he would yell you off the property. He heard JK yell, "I'm gonna get you! You might as well come out now. You know I'll find you." JK made a good point, but Kyle sought to prolong the inevitable as long as possible and pushed on into unknown territory.

Brush and cattails surrounded a gully ahead that Kyle could hide in. It was a better option compared to running into the rows of citrus trees that would force him to pick one to hide in. Going up in a tree was exactly the mistake that made JK so easy to find earlier. JK's bellowing became less distant, and Kyle knew he had to settle into a hiding place.

He pulled apart the cattails, moved farther and farther until they broke into nothing—nothing until he dipped his gaze down and saw the biggest bull gator he'd ever seen. The gator had made himself a little clearing of mud to lie in. He was as big as could be, just basking in the sun with his eyes closed and jaws open.

Kyle froze. He saw the beast's torso swell and deflate with each breath. Suddenly, the body twitched and the gator's eyelids flicked open. Kyle made ass and elbows out of there, zigging and zagging: through the muck, through the brush, out into the groves, through the barrage of rotten fruit hurled at him, and right past JK—yelling “Gator!” all the while.

* * *

Kyle would just as soon avoid another encounter with a giant reptile.

What to do?

He basically had to scoot himself down the slope on his butt to where Señor Borracho had ended up smashed against the fence—a rag doll with limbs all over the place. Next the hard part: getting the Señor up on the three-foot high concrete fixture that looked to be some sort of overflow, drainage device—a drainage block. Kyle needed just one squat-thrust motion with his legs to get Señor Borracho to an upright position that would allow Kyle to fold him up onto the top of the block, and then push the body into the pond, never to be seen again.

Kyle had to pull the body out of the thicket and drag it a short distance to the drainage block. As he jerked the body along, with his arms locked under Señor Borracho's armpits, Kyle's hamstrings were burning, and it felt like his muscles were tearing off the bone. The tumble down the slope had torn at and broken the body to the point where Kyle imagined he was dragging a victim out of the wreckage of some horrible crash that left gas seeping from the engine with the clear possibility that the vehicle could blow up at any second.

Finally there, Kyle groaned and dropped the body by the concrete fixture. Bent over, hands on knees, he gulped and gasped at the air. He heard a voice trickle down the slope from the general vicinity of the log. It was still dark, but he could sense daylight coming soon. The voice was singing with heavy breath. It was English, most likely it was one of the early-riser walkers Kyle and Lola had so often encountered while on dawn patrol to La Casita.

Now he could make out a person going up and down on the log, doing step-ups. Thankfully, the person appeared to be facing the ocean. The person now sat on the log. *C'mon*. Kyle stayed still and stared up the slope. *C'mon. Go. Get out of here you idiot*. Right on cue the idiot stood up and began moving off toward the ocean, doing lunges instead of walking. Kyle waited a few seconds. Time was slipping away. His knees had cramped and now creaked and crackled as he struggled to stand up straight. Shaking his legs out, he took a few deep breaths and reached down to hoist the body up. He had to hurry. *1-2-3. Go*.

The pain was sublime, but his knee didn't buckle. He held Señor Borracho—arms around him, face-to-face—as if in some sort of macabre dance. Kyle rotated his partner slowly and then dipped him onto the metal grate. He lifted Señor Borracho's legs on to the drainage block.

The growing light of impending sunrise was held at bay—clouds moved in. A chill overtook the air and the rustle of the trees grew louder. Bap-bap-bap. Heavy raindrops hit the sand, hit the water, hit the trees, hit the tin roofs, and drowned out the

waves, the wind, and the world. So cool, the shock of it pushed the pain away. He stood firm and invigorated.

While he pulled himself onto the altar to join Señor Borracho, the rain stopped as soon as it started, just like back home. One final motion, one final push, was all that was needed.

Señor Borracho's body flipped into the pond, but one disfigured foot extended above the water's surface. Kyle paused briefly before getting down, hoping to see Alberto suck the body down, to no avail. The foot was still sticking out of the pond. There was nothing he could do about it.

He struggled up the slope that would lead him back to the beach that would take him back to the cabina, back to the bus that would take him back to the airport, back to the plane that would take him back to Miami, and finally back home.

It was almost six o'clock by the time he made it back to the cabina. Lola was still asleep. He had 30 minutes to make the bus. A howler monkey roared like a bear and served as a rooster to this crack of dawn. His backpack lay in wait by the door. Lola was on her side facing him, still, asleep. Kyle went to the ice bucket and cupped cool water up on to his face. He dare not kiss her good-bye for fear of causing her to stir.

Love you. Catch some waves for me. See you soon. He scribbled on a pad on the nightstand. It was all he could think to write. He closed the door with one hand on the knob and the other palm flat on the door to secure silence as it slowly shut. She would wake to a new day, a day that already found him wrapped in a new reality. By the time she woke up, he would already be rolling toward San José.

The sound of sirens, the clap of feet chasing him, and hushed voices saying “There he is, over there” followed him in his mind and resurfaced randomly while he waited under the mango tree that served as the bus stop. As the departure time drew near, a few other grey bodies shuffled in to wait: a dusty tican man who smelled of chickens, a toothless grandmother with twig legs, a dark, barefoot young mother with full breasts and a swaddled little one nuzzled into them. The sun was starting to claim its place in the day, and the bus pulled away. All Kyle could do was hope, pray that Señor Borracho’s foot would slip under and slide away forever with the rest of the body.

About an hour into the ride, the bus stopped near Nicoya to pick up some passengers, and who should all but crawl on to the bus but the Three Amigos. They looked a damn sight worse than they had the last time he saw them. Alpha Dog was still leading the pack, and the left side of his face was a purple, black bruised mess that gave way to yellow on its perimeter. The left eye was nearly swollen shut and the other eye nervously scanned the bus. His two friends plodded, a little less loyally now, behind him.

Kyle could imagine that Alpha Dog’s bravado and West Coast “beaner” attitude had not played out so well in Costa Rica, even with the tican’s “Pura Vida” attitude. His eyes met with Alpha Dog’s for a second, and Kyle gave him no sympathy before returning his attention to the seahorse rolling around in his fingertips. He had his own shit to deal with.

The farther the bus got from Tamarindo, the quieter the voices in his head got, and the more muffled the chasing footsteps became. The calming effect the notion of not being caught provided was overrun by the reliving of what he’d done. Random snippets

of sound, smells, and visuals congealed and felt as if they'd made a home in his head.
Could he ever forget what happened? Forget what he did? Could he ever tell anyone?
Could he ever tell Lola?

Growing up, surfing the Inlet, he'd heard the older guys boasting about the rite of passage that was Costa Rica: the waves they scored, drunken nights, drugs, a jaguarundi spotted, young tican "grass on the infield" girls they banged, surviving on five dollars a day. They all had their stories, their souvenirs. And as the bus rumbled along, as he looked down at the dried-up seahorse, as the sun pushed its power into all beneath it, Kyle knew he had his.

BACK HOME

Why, Hello.

Vivian, Vivian Wilson. But call me Viv, all my friends do. Please, take a seat.

Join me.

It's nice to meet you too. You must be a new member. I don't recall seeing you around the club before, and I'm here most every day. But I must say Sunday Brunch is my favorite. You've got to love a meal that features mimosas and Bloody Marys.

Welcome to Burnside Manor Country Club. I know, what a name. It seems out of place down here. Somewhat pretentious for a gated golf community, don't you think? The club back home was over a hundred years old: flagstone fences, with hills and lakes. It was breathtaking in the fall.

Connecticut. Stamford, Connecticut. Thomas and I moved here thirteen years ago when he retired. And where are you from?

Oh, I simply love New York City. The theater. The symphony. The culture. The buzz. The excitement. I do miss it. There is so little *real* culture down here. On Wednesday nights, they have Open Mic Night here in the lounge area. You should see it. Every week Gerty gets up there and hammers away on the piano like a drunken hobo. It sounds as if she's killing a cat. And that voice! You'd think she would have improved after playing the same song week after week. I can't even hear *Moon River* on the radio without cringing. She has ruined the song forever. Andy Williams must be spinning in his grave. And all her friends . . . laughing, clapping, and carrying on like she has talent. You should see it!

My husband? Oh, Thomas, he passed away six and a half years ago.

It's okay. Thank you. And what about you?

He sounds wonderful. I do hope to meet him. That would be lovely.

Well, you look very nice too.

A dress like this? I'll tell you good fashion is so hard to find down here, but I found a place in the city, Maison de Marguerite. I hate going to Miami, all those Spanish people, but there is simply no other place to get a proper outfit around here. Back home there were *so* many smart little boutiques. And I can only imagine what you had in New York.

Where *is* that waiter? I would very much like another mimosa. This would *never* happen back home. The staff up north was very attentive. You wouldn't even need to ask, they simply knew and took care of it. Chop-chop.

Since you're going to the buffet anyway, could you be a dear and get me a mimosa from the bar. By the way, do try one of the miniature éclairs. They are simply to die for. Not quite as good as back home, but still delicious.

Thank you so very much. Where *is* that waiter? I suppose we'll have to bus our own plates.

For me? Why thank you. I usually try to stay away from sweets, but I do love these éclairs. How thoughtful of you.

I couldn't help but notice you being accosted by that woman Gerty in the buffet line. You two were really yucking it up. I'm glad to see you survived.

Of course, of course, she is pleasant enough—in small doses.

Oh heavens no! Thomas was the golfer. A bunch of grown men with sticks chasing around a little white ball. I never understood why Thomas spent so much time on the golf course. What a waste of time! How utterly boring.

Oh, oh, no, I just meant it was boring for me. I think it's great that you get out there in the fresh air. Great exercise I'm sure. Back home, I tried tennis once. It wasn't so hot there. Just you wait until August my dear, you will simply melt. Thank God for air conditioning.

Have you experienced the wildlife down here? Oh dear, bugs, snakes, and lizards everywhere. The place is rotten with them. I'll tell you something, back home we had nothing like it.

Yes, yes, I'm sure there were roaches in Manhattan. But here, here they are as big as your hand . . . And they fly, right at you!

Well, well, waiter. You finally check in on us. I thought maybe you died or something. I'll have another mimosa. And my friend?

A Bloody Mary it is.

It's so nice to have someone new around here, a new friend, someone to talk to. Most of the people around this place are simply dreadful. And have you met many of the local folk? My god, the way they talk down here, it's as if they are retarded. And I swear they must all be cousins to one another.

No, no, dear I'm sure your mother was nothing like the type of locals I'm talking about. These people are uncouth. They lack any semblance of refinement, not even a

spark. Oh, I can't imagine someone as sweet and charming as you coming from anything other than parents of distinction.

Well, I do think about going back. I did especially after Thomas died. He's the one who wanted to move down here in the first place. Where would I stay? My children, I rarely hear from them. They have their own lives. You know, you give them so much of your life, and then they are grown and gone and never want to visit.

Oh that's sweet. I'm glad you're here too. Uh-oh, here comes that ghastly Gerty. Just look at that phony smile she always has pasted on her face. No one can be that happy all the time.

Hello to you, Gerty.

I'm doing well. I'm just enjoying a nice brunch with my new friend. I believe you've already met.

Bridge? Oh, thank you, but cards just aren't my thing. We're just going to sit here and continue having a nice chat.

Oh, I didn't realize . . . no, no, not at all dear. You go right along and play cards with them. I'll be just fine. It was so nice to meet you. I'll look for you again. Enjoy your cards.

Waiter! Garçon!

I swear, back home . . .

CALL ME MYRNA

Good morning, Mrs. Robinson. I didn't wake you, did I?

Oh, heavens no. Is that you, Bobby?

No. No. Mrs. Robinson, my name is Glen. I'm with . . .

Bobby, what's with this Mrs. Robinson business? I'm your mother.

Mrs. Robinson, my name is Glen and I'm with Palm Coast End of Life Planning.

I'm calling because we're offering a special deal to our senior citizens today. It's easy, affordable on any budget, and . . .

Who is this?

Glen, from Palm Coast . . .

Oh, I should have known it wasn't Bobby.

Okay, Mrs. Robinson. Do you make the financial decisions in the house or is there a Mr. Robinson I should be talking to?

You know, Bobby wet the bed until he was fifteen. Every morning cleaning wet sheets and pajamas. Every morning for years and not so much as a phone call from that one unless it's Christmas or my birthday.

Is there a Mr. Robinson in the house?

Robert's been dead for years and there's no house anymore either, thanks to Bobby. Putting his dear mother in a place like this. Shame.

Mrs. Robinson . . .

I had the most beautiful gardenia bush. A good six feet tall, and when it bloomed the whole block could smell it. Everyone loved that gardenia. They won't let you keep plants in this place. Not even a cactus.

Mrs. Robinson, we . . .

Call me Myrna.

Myrna, we offer some wonderful plans for any budget that will give you and your family peace of mind.

Peace of mind sounds nice.

Yes, doesn't it? Now, I know you wouldn't want to be a burden to your son Bobby and the rest of the family, would you?

I should very much like to be a burden to Bobby. Can you help me with that?

Oh, you don't really mean that. Now Myrna, we have a special deal for today and today only that helps take care of everything after your gone.

Gone? Where am I going? I'd certainly like to be out of here. One fall you can fight back from, but at my age the second fall is too tough.

That's exactly what I'm saying. You never know when your time will come so you need to be prepared. Really, I don't want to scare you with the gory details of what can happen to those who don't prepare for the inevitable, but I can assure you that it is quite horrible.

You know, I was still scaling the ladder and harvesting the grapefruit tree in the back yard up until I was seventy-two.

That's impressive. I'm forty-three and I don't think I could do that.

I know how old my own son is. Did you think I forgot? July 12th, it was so hot. Twenty hours of labor with you.

Myrna, let's say we get back on track and discuss your funeral arrangements for a little bit and then we can chat, okay. We can talk about anything you'd like, I promise, but business first. Now, I think you said you liked the deluxe package and you're in luck because we're running a fifty percent off special on that plan.

Whatever you say, Bobby. Your father never did like me going up that grapefruit tree. He didn't like me doing much of anything. I was a strong woman. He was always just sitting there watching the boob tube. I wanted to do things.

Now with the deluxe package everything is covered, and I mean everything is paid for. No worries for anyone. Myrna, do you have a debit card, credit card or checking account? I might need your social security number, too.

Robert always handled all the financial business. He wouldn't even let me have a checking account. But I have one now. It's not rocket science, you know.

Super. You're in charge of the money now, Myrna. I'll need you to get your checkbook so you can read me the routing numbers on the bottom of the check.

Toward the end, Bobby, I swear it was just like when you were a baby. I had to feed your father, change his diapers, bathe him—day after day. Your father was no saint, you know. He didn't make it easy, that's for sure.

Okay Myrna, do you have your checkbook? I really just need those routing numbers at the bottom. And then we can talk all day long. I'm very interested.

My purse is right here. Heavens, where is that . . . oh, here it is.

Good. Let's get this business out of the way so we can get back to chatting. It's easy, all I need . . .

It wasn't really that hard, you know. I tucked him in to bed every night and then I would finally have some time to myself. He still had enough strength to get from the wheelchair to the bed with my help.

That's nice, Myrna. I bet you were a wonderful wife. You could really help me out with those numbers at the bottom of your check. Do you see them?

Yes. I mean I *am* a strong woman. I just put the pillow on his face and he went to sleep. He looked so cold, so I covered him with that beautiful blanket we used to keep on the couch. Remember when I used to knit for you and your father? My hands can't do it anymore. But do you remember?

Wait a minute. What was that?

Can you come tuck your mother in? I'll give you those numbers, Bobby, I swear. Just come tuck your mother in. I'm tired.

FEELING IT

Little Johnny Harding couldn't wait to get to church. It wasn't because he liked church, but because his best friend in the whole world, Willem, would be there. Willem lived on the opposite end of the county and went to a different school, so church was pretty much the only time they got to hang out.

Little Johnny was called that because his father was Big John who was a big guy—not like fat, but like big and strong. He welded and repaired tractors and other farm machinery. Little Johnny wanted to be just like his dad when he grew up.

His parents parked the car and made their way to the church. The church was not unlike most you'd find in North Florida. It was a plain white structure with a high-pitched roof and the standard steeple. The church's only eccentricity was the ancient bell tower that had originally served as an alarm for some seldom-mentioned Spanish settlement that had disintegrated long ago. Except for the stairs, doorway, and some minor structural repairs, the bell tower remained as it had been the day it was created.

Johnny began to bolt from the car toward the bell tower.

"Johnny, wait a second," his father said.

Johnny stopped. "Yes, sir?"

"You're going to behave aren't you?"

Johnny knew it wasn't really a question. "Yes, sir."

"Okay, you and Willem stay out of trouble, you hear?"

Johnny yelled, "We will," as he ran to the tower.

Willem was waiting by the bell tower doorway and, by the smirk on Willem's face, Johnny knew he had made a mistake by wasting energy running there.

Willem greeted him. "Are you ready?"

"No fair. You gotta let me catch my breath. I just ran here," Johnny said.

"Sure. No problem. It's not gonna make any difference anyway." Willem was probably right. He always won. Even though they were both ten-years old—Johnny was actually two months older than Willem—Willem was much bigger and stronger than Johnny. Johnny had yet to beat him in any physical challenge.

"Are you ready now?" Willem asked.

Johnny got stone-faced, braced himself, and nodded "yes."

"On your marks. Get set. Go!" And with that Willem flung open the door and they tore up the bell tower stairs in an effort to see who could get to the top first. The stairs wound inside the three-story tower that stood next to the church, and the boys were neck and neck until they rounded the last corner and launched up the final twenty steps to the bell. That's when Willem's longer legs gained the advantage as he leapt and skipped steps up to the landing that supported the church's bell.

"Ha! Beat you again." Willem gasped for air.

Little Johnny Harding said, "One of these days, Willem. You'll see."

Willem bent over to catch his breath, Johnny took advantage and grabbed him in a headlock and they tussled about the landing, laughing and screaming all the while.

The door at the bottom of the stairwell creaked open, Deacon Wallace shoved his head through and craned his neck upward. "Quiet down up there! So help me . . . if I have

to come up there, I'll shame you in front of the whole congregation again." The boys stopped. Deacon Wallace pulled his head out of the stairwell for a second to look around outside and see if the ruckus had attracted any attention. Then he brought his head back in. "What would your parents think of that! Do you think they'd like it? Do you? It's only been two weeks since the incident. I'm sure it's fresh in their minds."

In sing-song unison, Johnny and Willem replied down the stairwell, "No, sir."

"That's right. They wouldn't like it one little bit. Now remember, I'll signal you from outside, then you run down and ring the bell for the start of the service. You got that?"

Again in unison, "Yes, sir."

As soon as the door shut, Willem laughed, but Johnny was remembering the aftermath of the incident, and couldn't bring himself to laugh. They had crawled through the air conditioning ducts under the pews during a sermon and randomly, at well-spaced intervals, emitted loud sounds of flatulence. It had taken Deacon Wallace a good twenty minutes or so to figure out that the noises were not a product of nature, but rather noises coming from the ducts where he found Johnny and Willem snickering away.

They were sent to the Pastor's office after the service. It was an experience Johnny would just as soon never go through again. Willem's parent's seemed unfazed by it all, probably due to Willem's older brother Silas breaking them in. Johnny's parents, on the other hand, were fazed, and their looks of disappointment almost hurt Johnny as much as the spankings he received when they got home.

Pastor Deems thought giving the boys some responsibility might “whip them into shape,” hence the bell-ringing duty—for them it was a test, but it was usually an honor reserved for older boys on their way to confirmation. Now Johnny stood with Willem looking down through the bell tower slats toward the sidewalk outside the church, waiting for the Deacon’s cue.

Live oaks surrounded the parking lot and lined the wide sidewalk entryway, and the undulating shade they provided made for a dramatic path toward salvation. Johnny was mesmerized for a moment by the pulsing shadows. Willem pretended to pull a rifle butt up into his shoulder and systematically mimed picking off members of the congregation. Johnny laughed and joined in. In the midst of the pretend massacre, Deacon Wallace appeared in their sights and gave them the thumbs-up signal. Johnny and Willem stopped playing around.

“Let’s go.” Johnny headed to the stairs to go down and pull the bell’s rope.

“Wait a minute.” Willem said.

“What do you mean ‘wait a minute’, we gotta ring the bell . . . C’mon, my parents will kill me if we screw this up.”

“Relax. Don’t worry. You know what Silas told me?”

Johnny was an only child, and glad of it considering Silas. He was afraid to hear what Willem’s delinquent older brother had to say about anything. Silas had, after all, given them “fancy chocolate” to eat one day that actually ended up being “fancy laxative.” Johnny hesitated. “What did Silas say?”

“He said you could slide yourself down the rope from here, stop yourself halfway, and the bell would ring, and then pull you up, and then ring over and over again.”

Considering its source, Johnny didn’t trust the information. “Get out of here.”

“Seriously. He said so. What? You afraid?” Willem started clucking and strutting around like a chicken in a farmyard.

Johnny did not like being called a chicken and Willem knew it. He had had enough. And with that, little Johnny Harding flung himself down the bell rope. His hands burned to a stop halfway down, and what do you know? It worked. The bell rang more erratically than usual, but it rang nonetheless.

Dong. Dong. Dong. Little Johnny Harding, to his amazement, went up and down and up and down. Silas was right. The boys hooted and hollered.

“I wanna try,” Willem said.

“No. We gotta get in there now. C’mon.” Johnny pulled Willem’s arm and led him out of the bell tower. They fell in line with the stragglers who had quickened their pace in getting into the church. Children were pulled along faster than they could walk, high heels clacked on the sidewalk—no one wanted to enter after the sermon started.

The dark wooden pews faced a gleaming white pulpit that was silhouetted against a massive, colorful stained glass window depicting the crucifixion of a bleeding Christ. As the congregation finished taking their seats, the lights inside the church were darkened except for a single spotlight left to beam upon the pulpit. The sun shone through the stained glass and painted the congregation with all the colors of the rainbow. Johnny and Willem didn’t take their place with the rest. Instead, they slunk into a far dark corner in

the back of the church. Sitting on the ground, in the corner, they could remain unseen unless someone was looking for them.

Clara Jean's arthritic fingers found their place on the organ's keyboard, and she brought to life the music she'd played on Sundays for over forty years, starting always with *Bringing in the Sheaves*. Johnny was sick of the song. The rustling and coughing congregation quieted down and settled into their seats. He was coming.

He was Pastor Deems, and he was a force to be reckoned with. Johnny was scared of him. Pastor Deems had grown up on a small cattle farm near Thonotosassa, east of Tampa. They all knew his story. It was like a folk tale to the children of the church.

As a youngster, Pastor Deems was on a path to take over the family farm and work it the way his father and his father and his father had. His great grandfather started with sixty acres of inhospitable Florida scrub and a thirty-head herd of stringy cracker cattle, but he worked hard, and so did his son. By the time Pastor Deems was a teenager, there were over four hundred head of Angus beef cattle and two hundred acres of quality grazing land.

Like his forefathers Pastor Deems labored on the farm while he was growing up and seemed poised to do the family proud. But sometimes paths are diverted, sometimes the best-laid plans go astray—such was the case with Pastor Deems. It seems he and his buddy, Ray-Ray, were walking along the county road one day after school—talking and carrying on like teenage boys do—when an eighteen-wheeler thundered by a bit too close for comfort.

The force of the semi-truck pushed Pastor Deems to the ground and when he looked over he saw that Ray-Ray had fallen down as well—only something was off, something was wrong. Pastor Deems looked down the road after the truck, but something else caught his eye. It was on the ground, not more than ten yards away. It was Ray-Ray's head.

Not long after, the Lord came calling and Pastor Deems answered. So the story goes. Johnny had made a drawing of the bloody scene in Sunday school once and Deacon Wallace had not been pleased with Johnny's depiction.

Pastor Deems was a big, strong man like Johnny's father. But he was shinier—with his silver hair, white shoes, white shirt, and white suit and tie all making him glow like an angel in Johnny's eyes.

Today, the pastor kept the congregation waiting longer than he usually did. Johnny didn't care except that he and Willem had to be extra quiet so they wouldn't be found out. The music had stopped, the congregation fidgeted, and children fussed. Johnny and Willem hid in the corner, silently playing rock-paper-scissors. Finally, Pastor Deems bounced out and merged with the pulpit, the stained glass glowing behind him. He held still until the entire congregation was silent and focused on him. And then he spoke unto them.

"God hates a queer." The congregation grumbled and Pastor Deems let the weight of his words sink in until silence prevailed. "Now, I know I'm not being 'politically correct' in these times of gay marriage and such." He had held his hands up and made air quotes to emphasize the words "politically correct." "But God hates a queer." Again he

let it sink in, bowing his head for a moment before pulling it up again. “Well, maybe hate is a strong word, but he certainly doesn’t approve.” Pastor Deems was what Johnny’s Mom called “feeling it”—feeling the power of the Lord.

Johnny whispered to Willem, “What’s a queer?”

Willem replied, “You know. A fag. A homo.”

“I mean . . . yeah, I know that, but what does it mean?”

“Silas told me. It’s when a boy likes another boy or a girl likes another girl.”

“But, I like you . . .” Johnny said.

Willem laughed. “No. It’s like men kissing each other and being boyfriends.”

Confused, Johnny said, “I don’t get it.” Willem shushed Johnny to be quiet.

Pastor Deems’ barrel chest swelled and he held his hand to his mouth for a moment before he spoke again. “Now the Bible tells us ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.’” He paused. “Folks, think about it for a second . . . an abomination. *Abomination*, that’s a pretty strong sounding word. I wasn’t so sure of its meaning, so I looked it up in the dictionary. And I quote, ‘a thing that causes disgust or hatred.’ So the Bible tells us that homosexuality is disgusting and worthy of hate.” All eyes were on him, and Pastor Deems was set to drive his message home. His body rose up for the delivery, and then a woman’s voice came out of the congregation.

“Pastor Deems.” Heads swiveled around back and forth as the congregation searched for the source of the words. Johnny and Willem stopped their game, stood up on their knees and looked out into the congregation.

“Pastor Deems, over here.” A young woman in one of the back pews stood up.
“Over here.” The church found her.

Noticeably annoyed at the interruption, Pastor Deems held his hand up to shield his eyes from the spotlight, and then acknowledged the young woman. “Yes, yes. What is it? Who is it? Introduce yourself.”

“It’s me. Laura. Laura Reynolds. Remember?”

Pastor Deems hesitated. “Yes, certainly . . . Laura Reynolds.” He leaned on the pulpit and squinted toward her. Trying to pull the focus of the congregation back to him, he spoke. “Now people, if you don’t know or don’t remember, Laura grew up in this church and went off to college. What school is it, Laura?”

Still standing, Laura answered, “Christ the Redeemer College of Tennessee. I graduated. Summa Cum Laude.”

Since Johnny’s family had only been going to the church for a couple of years, he asked Willem, “Who is she?”

“I’m not sure, but I think she used to help out in Sunday school.”

Pastor Deems addressed the congregation. “Would you look at that, one of our own graduating from a fine Christian college—Summa Cum Laude, no less. Thank you, Laura, for dropping by. We’re all very proud of you.” The pastor went back to his sermon. “Now folks, like I was saying, the Bible tells us ‘You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination’.”

“The Bible’s book of legislation, Leviticus—Leviticus 18:22.” Laura was still standing.

Pastor Deems asked, “What was that?”

“I said Leviticus 18:22.”

“Um . . . yes, very good, Laura. That’s correct Leviticus 18:22. I’m glad to see that your college has its students keep to the Bible. Now, let me continue.”

“But Pastor Deems, doesn’t the Bible also tell us ‘Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law?’ Romans 13:8.”

Willem got up from the floor to see better. “What’s going on, Willem?” Johnny asked. “Sit back down. They’re gonna see you.” Johnny was winning and thought this was a ploy by Willem to get out of playing.

“No one’s gonna be looking back here, believe me. I wanna see this.” Willem replied.

Johnny joined him. “What’s happening?” He could sense something going on.

“She’s challenging Pastor Deems,” Willem replied.

Raising his voice and rising on the balls of his feet Pastor Deems countered Laura. “And the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.’ Romans 1:27.”

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free, there is no male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus.’ Galatians 3:28.” Laura paused. “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Galatians 5:24.”

“What are they talking about? Pastor Deems seems mad. I don’t like this. C’mon let’s finish the game,” Johnny said.

“They’re arguing. I think they’re talking about being a homo,” Willem replied.

Searching his mind, the pastor lifted his eyes and then finally spoke. “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor the idolaters, not adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.’ Corinthians 6:9 and 10.”

The congregation looked to Laura now and she gave the slightest smile. “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.’ Matthew 7:1.”

Flustered at first, Pastor Deems then regrouped himself. “What did they teach you up at that college anyway? Do you even believe in God?”

“I believe in a God of love.”

Johnny was feeling uncomfortable. He didn’t understand most of what they had said, but he did remember hearing in Sunday school that God was a god of love. Johnny’s face felt hot and he sat back down on the floor and hid. He wanted this to end.

The pastor addressed the congregation with a laugh. “Now folks, I don’t have a fancy degree from a fancy college, but I do know . . .”

Speaking loudly, Laura interrupted him. “Pastor Deems . . .”

Raising his voice, Pastor Deems said, “Now you look here, young lady, I’ve put up with just about all I plan to. You are interrupting my sermon and you are disturbing

this church.” Shielding his eyes from the light, he looked out into the congregation.

“Deacon Wallace, where are you?”

Deacon Wallace stood up and waved his arms. “Over here.”

“Kindly escort this young woman out of our church.”

Deacon Wallace made his way to the young woman and began to remove her. She struggled against his grip. “You can’t do this. Why won’t you listen?”

Pastor Deems said, “I’ve listened to quite enough from you. And believe me, I can do this. This is my church. Now good day, and don’t come back. You’re not welcome here. Leave.”

Johnny turned to watch Deacon Wallace lead the young woman to the doors. The Deacon opened them and pushed the young woman out into the bright sunlight and then shut and locked the doors.

The congregation turned back to the Pastor.

“Sorry about that, folks. Now where were we? Ah, yes . . . God hates a queer.”

Still on the floor in the back of the church, Johnny cringed and felt like the whole church was staring at him. He felt like every word was about him.

RABBITS

He seemed to know.

Was it pheromones, some sort of musk, an atmospheric energy, or a primordial connection he tapped into as a means to insure his place as the primary receiver of maternal attention? Whatever the catalyst was, his methods were highly effective, so much so that we had all but resigned ourselves to scurrying downstairs like frightened mice in our own house.

The kitchen—which sex scenes in movies tended to make seem so adventurous, à la *The Postman Always Rings Twice*—was horribly suited for the task at hand: dishes clattered or, worse yet, broke . . . surfaces were hard and cold and of an impractical height . . . a slew of dangerously sharp utensils . . . sounds amplified and ping-ponged off all the tile, stainless steel, and porcelain, causing the whole house to stir and awaken.

The dining area was a better option, but far more painful. The hard, wooden upright chairs combined with the wooden floors made knees, backs, hips, shoulders, and necks burn with pain and cramp with an unforgiving stiffness that lingered. And the heart pine dining table, though crafted by my very own hands, tended to creak, pop, and groan in ways that made me question (if only to myself) its ability to stand up to the rigors of our adult activity. What was sensually portrayed in soap operas was not so much so in our experience.

There was the backroom, but that belonged to the girls and their toys and feeble desks. No, the backroom warranted little attention. Besides, having the children's toys watching us was kind of creepy.

The bathroom was home to fixtures, sink, and toilet, each surprisingly easy to dislodge from their anchors and each so difficult to repair. Combine that with the bevy of unkind mirrors and lights that only steam from a hot shower could soften. Like Adam and

Eve, we left with downcast eyes. The bathroom survived but one excursion before being awarded a unanimous two-thumbs down.

That left only the living room as a downstairs option. Upon less than careful consideration, one might imagine this to be the best of all possible rooms: plush and supple chocolate brown leather sofa with matching love seat, chair, and ottoman. There was even a chartreuse, deep-pile throw rug (with under-padding no less!) covering most of the blond bamboo flooring. Judge not a book by its cover. The sofa, though large, was designed for one to recline upon, with feet up and pillow behind head. Maybe read a book. Maybe catch a snooze. But for the physical activities of two consenting adults, it made for an undersized stage that severely limited movement and creativity. And if you weren't acting horizontally, it offered little more comfort than the dining area.

To be brief, the love seat was clearly named for the emotion not the action. And despite its under-padding, the deep pile throw rug scarcely hid the fact that we were bouncing around on a wood floor—to which our bodies gave testament after being merely minutes engaged. That left the chair and ottoman—a pair made glorious by the simple fact that they offered some measure of comfort—and the challenges this two-pieced puzzle put forward mirrored the puzzle of our two bodies. The chair and ottoman forced creative solutions both new and exciting.

It had been about eight months and the “new and exciting” chair and ottoman had become routine. We wanted—no, needed—to be in our bed upstairs. We needed to feel pillows, sheets, blankets, and mattress. We needed to be allowed to collapse, under burden of sweat and exhaustion, into sleep—into our own bed.

Tonight we needed it and so softly, so carefully, so quietly, we tried. Our mouths met and moans were stifled. Our limbs rubbed mute and our hands kneaded silent. No words. No gasps. No sounds.

No sounds, and yet, he seemed to know. He flipped back and forth in his crib, with no particular rhyme or reason. We became statues and gave him a unified stare out of the corners of our eyes. To turn and acknowledge him meant certain death. He lay still for a time. All of the sudden he pulled himself up by the crib railing and wailed and whimpered like a wounded dog. Face red, tears streaming, he wailed at us over and over again—the shame of it all. By the time my wife got him back to sleep, our desires were stanching.

His methods are highly effective.

He is asleep now and so is my wife. I stand naked by the bedroom window bathing in the full moon's pale light. I look down into the backyard and, since it has just ten minutes ago become the first day of the month, I utter the word *rabbit* for good luck.

DROWSY

I still remember when they brought him into this god-forsaken place. I remember thinking: *Great, another total no-hoper*. The doors slid open. It was January, so there was a little nip in the air. Not that it actually ever gets real cold down here, mind you.

Anyway, the nurse at reception buzzed them in, the doors opened, and the wind howled in from the ocean. There was a hell of a nor'easter ripping through that day. You could tell by the way the palm trees out front were blowing around. Well, I was out in the main communal area reading—not like those dopes who sat parked in front of the boob tube all day watching 172 channels of crap—when *whoosh* the pages of my book flipped themselves like something out of a horror movie.

I looked up to see what all the commotion is about and that's when I saw them wheel him in on a gurney, along with a bunch of tubes and hoses and beep-beep machines. They rolled him right past me, the gurney wheels clack-clacking on the terrazzo floor.

Now I'm thinking *Whoa! They might as well keep him on that thing because he's looking pretty rough*. You know what I mean? He was as skinny as a skeleton with dark eye sockets and cheeks all sunk in. They'd probably just be rolling him right back out in a couple of days to take him to the bone yard. Why bother messing up a perfectly made bed? *That guy's a goner*. That's what I was thinking.

Why were they bringing in a guy like that? I always joked that they should call these places “assisted dying” instead of “assisted living,” but with him it looked like that's just what they were doing—bringing him into die. I'll tell you something, they'd do

a brisk business in this joint if that was one of the services they offered. I'm sure more than half these dopes would just as soon be dead. Hell, a few more years in this place and I'd probably sign up for it. I bet you the insurance companies would be all for it, the families too. Think of all the money that would be saved.

I got up and followed them because I wanted to see what gives with this guy. So they wheel him down the main hallway, move him into his bed, get his machines all situated, shut the door, and that was that.

Three days he was sealed up in there. And no one, I mean no one except for Ms. Tatum herself, was going in and out of the room. Ms. Tatum was kind of like the head nurse here and, no matter whatever anyone else tells you, she was definitely the one in charge.

When they finally brought him out, I was in the main area doing a crossword to keep my brain active and also to calm down. You see, I'd just had it out with that Patsy woman. She was a resident here just like me. Anyway, she called me a racist because I called the President an idiot. Really? Just because he's colored I can't criticize the guy? I called him an idiot, and I called the guy before him an idiot, and the guy before that. They're all idiots if you ask me.

I sat there doing my crossword and Ms. Tatum rolled him right up to my table. He was slouched over in the wheelchair and I noticed that they had him strapped in. His eyes were closed, his head was tilted to one side, and there was some pasty drool in the corners of his mouth.

Ms. Tatum started to walk away and I said, "Hey, is he alive?"

“Of course,” she said. “Do you really think I would roll a corpse into the communal area?”

“What’s one more?”

She stopped, stared, and gave me her signature, disapproving look.

I asked her, “Where’s all the tubes and stuff he had before? The hoses, the machines, where are they?”

“He just needed those to stabilize him during transport. Apparently, he’s a very excitable type.”

I gave him the once over and said, “Yeah, I can tell.”

She chuckled and shook her head.

“Well, why’d you bring him over here to me?”

“I thought you could use the company. You know, someone to talk to.” And with that she walked away, laughing.

Honestly, I think she did it because of my argument with Patsy.

I eyed the skeleton across the table and said, “Welcome to Ocean Vista Assisted Living, my friend.” He didn’t reply.

Ms. Tatum said he was alive. I figured he must be able to hear me, so I decided to give him the scoop on the place. I rolled him over to the front windows where we could see outside. Ms. Tatum eyeballed us the whole way. There are some strip heaters on the floor by the windows and they kept you warm. Also, there was a nice chair there for me to sit in.

I told him, “Like I said before, this place is called Ocean Vista *Assisted Living*. They don’t call them retirement homes anymore. You know how the Eskimos put their old people, who can’t contribute anymore, on a hunk of ice and send them out to sea? Well, I figure Assisted Living is our society’s hunk of ice at sea. To tell the truth, sometimes I think I’d rather be set out to sea.”

He gave no reaction.

“You got any family?” I asked him. “That’ll really help you out in here. You know, if family come and visit the staff pays more attention to keeping you and your room clean.” He just sat there. “No family? That’s okay. You play your cards right and I’ll look out for you.”

I could tell he was curious, so I said, “Me, I gotta look out for myself. My ex is dead as far as I know. My boy . . . well I’m seventy-one . . . Hell, that would make him forty-five now. I’ll be a son-of-a-bitch. He was four when I left them. Haven’t seen or heard from him since. I really screwed the pooch on that one.”

Right about then a fight broke out over by the television. “Mine!” a feeble voice tried to scream. “Mine!” another voice answered back. Two of the zombies were fighting over a pillow. Zombies, that’s what I called some of the more mobile mopes in the place. They could move around, but their brains weren’t all there.

Anyway, Ms. Tatum took the pillow and separated them. And wouldn’t you know it, one of the zombies limped over sat down with us by the windows. I glared at him real good. “Scram,” I said. But the zombie just sat there drooling and grinning at me. He was

creeping me out so I said to the newbie in the wheelchair, “C’mon, I’ll show you around.” I got up and pulled his wheelchair away from the table, talking all the while.

“Funny, it’s called Ocean Vista, but you can’t actually see the ocean from here. The ocean’s just a block away once you cross the main road out front. It’s right there, but we never get to go to the beach. And trust me, don’t even ask them about it.

“If the weather’s nice enough, they take us into the courtyard out back once a day. That’s my favorite part of the day. The sun warms you and the ocean air feels good in your lungs. The fresh air and sunshine make you feel alive. I swear the air they pipe into this place reminds me of a morgue. I wonder sometimes if they put some kind of drug or gas in the air to keep us sedated. It smells too sterile. That’s in the main rooms, but in the residential hallways—it flat-out stinks.”

We were making our way out of the main room when Ms. Tatum came over to check on us. “How you fellas doing over here? Everything okay?” She was looking at me real hard.

“Doing great. Just filling my new friend in on all the details. You know, giving him the lay of the land. He’s a good listener.”

She raised an eyebrow and said, “I’d be curious to hear what your version of what the ‘lay of the land’ is like.” She looked down at my hands on the wheelchair and asked, “Are you two going somewhere?”

“I thought I’d show him around. That’s okay, right?” I answered.

“I guess so, but behave.” She gave me that same look she always does and then went back to the reception desk.

I told him, “She’s tough, but at least she talks to you like you’re a human being with a brain. Most of the others talk *at* you like you’re a baby. Or they don’t really know how to speak English. That’s if they even bother to talk to you at all.”

It was true. Almost all of the “caregivers” were either young local women or coloreds. The young ones wanted nothing to do with “disgusting” old people and were tapping away on their cell phones every chance they got. I had even seen them taking pictures of residents that I knew they were making fun of, and then they sent the photos to their friends for laughs. They had no respect for their elders. Society was in a lot of trouble if those nitwits were our future.

Most of the colored caregivers were foreigners—they were okay. At least they tried to talk to you with their broken English. Although, I do think the first phrase they were taught when they got hired was, “Quit complaining.” They could be kind of rough with you, but I don’t think they meant anything by it. I just think the elderly were treated different where they’re from. I got the idea they thought we were soft, like we had chosen to be there, like we liked having people take care of us.

Well, I took him on the grand tour of the place, which didn’t take too long, that’s for sure. There was the main communal room that had a couple of televisions and couches, a corner reading area with bookshelves, a few recliner-type chairs, a sofa, and some tables. There was a pool table and ping-pong table that must have been for show, because I never saw anyone use them for their intended purpose.

The dining room had mostly bench and wheelchair seating, no windows, bad lighting, and they served you cafeteria-style like when you were in school. The food was

kind of similar to that too. It wasn't that great in my opinion, but I think most of the dopes in the place didn't even notice. Oh yeah, they also showed movies in the dining room twice a week. They'd show mostly oldies, some black and white classics, even a silent movie every once in a while.

The rooms were pretty much all the same: small, a bathroom, a hospital bed in most, a little desk and chair, a television, a radio, a chest of drawers, plastic flowers in a vase, a little bookshelf, and a clock. There were forty rooms and the place was almost always fully booked. I tried to keep out of my room as much as possible. I tried to keep active. I liked to move around. I saw so many people just waste away. They walked in to this place and before you knew it they got kind of comatose. They found a way to just lie around in bed all day, and that's when you've gone downhill.

There was a recreation room that had padded flooring. They did exercise classes and things like that in there. You know. Stretching. Chair aerobics. Yoga. Once a week they did arts and crafts. I loved the arts and crafts. The woman, Miss Pearl, that came in to do the art classes was something else. She was a real looker—nice too. She was always happy—a candle in a dark cave. I went there just to see her smile, to smell her, to remember what a woman was like. She gave me a hug every time.

I saved the best for last, the courtyard. Like I said, they tried to get everyone outside once a day if the weather was good. But for lots of folks it was either too hot or too cold, so maybe half the residents would go out on a good day. Me, I did my best to go out there everyday no matter what. You had to be supervised, but I knew the caregivers

that smoked and I made sure I was always nice to them because they'd take me out there so that they could smoke and mess around on their phones.

Even if it was raining, I went out. There was a part that had a roof with concrete benches and tables under it. Some school kids came out one day and painted the tables and benches a couple years ago. You know, as a community service, to do something nice for the old people. They didn't want us mingling with the kids though, except for photos of course. The local newspaper came out to do a story and everything. Everyone was all gaga about it. Some of the higher-ups from the company that owned the place even showed up. I had my photo in the paper shaking some board member's hand. I mean, the painting didn't look like much to me. I guess it's the thought that counts.

There was even a pool out in the courtyard. Not too deep. They used to use it for therapy, but they hadn't had physical therapists come in for years. Then they tried the water aerobics, but people ended up messing themselves in the water. It was gross. Then they told us no one was allowed in the pool because of liability reasons. I thought they were just trying to cut expenses. I still dipped my feet in there sometimes.

I rolled him back to Ms. Tatum and said, "I gave him the grand tour."

"Giving him the 'lay of the land?'"

"Yeah, something like that. I figured that even with his eyes closed, at least he could hear about the place. Get to know it."

"Well, all right then. That's probably enough excitement for one day." She took him back to his room.

Over the next couple weeks I spent a little bit of time talking to him every day—it was something to do. Besides, he was a good listener. A couple weeks after he got here I overheard the nickname the caregivers had given him. They called him “Drowsy” on account of his eyes always being closed. I thought that was pretty rich. So that’s what I started calling him—Drowsy.

I don’t know, maybe three or four weeks after he got here, I saw Drowsy over by the windows with his eyes open! How about them apples?

I went over and told Ms. Tatum. “You see that over there? Drowsy’s got his eyes open!”

“I don’t know if I approve of people calling him Drowsy.”

I said, “He doesn’t mind.”

“How on earth do you know whether he minds or not?”

I told her, “He told me so.”

“What do you mean, ‘He *told* me so?’ There is no record of him being able to speak. His file actually says he cannot speak.”

“Whatever, didn’t you hear me? I said his eyes are open.”

“Yes. I know. I noticed it yesterday.”

I couldn’t believe how matter-of-fact she was being. “Well, isn’t it a big deal?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I guess he’s finally settling in, maybe he’s getting comfortable with the place. There’s nothing in his file that says he can’t open his eyes. Nothing in there that says he’s blind. So no, it isn’t that big a deal.”

“Jeez. You could of told me. Well, I’m taking him on the tour again and making sure he sees it this time.”

“Knock yourself out.” She didn’t even look up from her paperwork.

After that, I kept thinking that he was going to have his eyes open all the time, but come to find out, Drowsy was probably a good name for him. You see, he only opened his eyes, maybe, twenty-five percent of his waking hours. He didn’t move too much either. That was fine, we still had fun.

Ms. Tatum was wrong about Drowsy. He could talk, but I think I was the only one that would listen to him. Maybe he didn’t want to talk to no one else. What do I know? Anyway, I liked the guy. We hung out a lot for a while—mostly everyday. Drowsy was good company, good people.

We talked about all kinds of stuff. Drowsy could be pretty funny—a dry kind of funny, if you know what I mean. And he had the corniest jokes. Ah, this one was pretty good though.

One day Drowsy asked me, “You ever seen a matta boo-boo?”

I said, “What’s a matta boo-boo?”

He said, “Nothing, Yogi.”

Get it? Like the cartoon Yogi Bear? That one cracked me up. I was never good with the jokes, but Drowsy came up with some good ones.

You know, that skinny little guy was a bodyguard for Jackie Gleason down in Miami. Can you believe it? Guess he was a big guy back then. He talked a lot about Jackie. Who wouldn’t? He even got into some scrapes down there. Imagine a skeleton

like that being a tough guy. He told me one time about these two wanna-be gangsters getting all mouthy with Jackie at the club, trying to show everyone what big shots they were. Well, Drowsy invited them out back and then proceeded to smash their heads together like a couple of coconuts. Can you believe it?

Oh, yeah, then there was the turtle soup. Seems Jackie loved turtle soup. Had to have it a couple times a week. That was one of Drowsy's jobs, getting Jackie turtle soup. And it had to be hot, burn your mouth hot, when Drowsy delivered it. A twenty-dollar tip each time. That was a lot of money back then.

You know Jackie loved the ladies, and by ladies I mean plural. This one time Jackie brought three girls back to his place and you know what he said to Drowsy? Jackie goes, "Two's enough for me tonight, you take this one." Like she's a sandwich or something. You believe it, Drowsy hanging out with celebrities and wiseguys. I'll tell you, that guy had stories.

Drowsy could roll his chair, but it was slow, like *real* slow. He basically would slide his feet out from the footrests and do baby steps on the floor. Pulling himself along by his heels. It was slow and, on top of that, he could only last about ten feet or so. After a few times of him trying to move along, I decided I'd roll him around when we needed to get somewhere. He didn't mind.

I took him to the arts and crafts one day, thought I'd show him Miss Pearl. I'd been talking her up and wanted him to check her out. I figured maybe he'd like to get a hug from a pretty lady. So we went there and we were making turkeys out of pinecones and construction paper. It was near Thanksgiving time. Using pinecones wasn't such a

good idea because all the oldies ended up poking and cutting their fingers on the pinecones. People were losing what little blood they had left.

Anyway, I was working on my turkey—Drowsy was just watching because he doesn't move so much—when I turned to Drowsy and I asked him, “So what do you think?”

He said, “I think this is more like Passover than Thanksgiving.”

Get it? Passover. You know, because of all the blood. I told you the guy had a strange sense of humor. It took me a few seconds to get it, but he killed me with that one. I looked around to see if anyone else caught it, but no one did.

I said to him, “So, what do you think about Miss Pearl?”

You know what he said? Drowsy said, “Not for me. I like a woman with a fuller bottom.”

Can you believe it? Guy like him, in a wheelchair, skinny as a rail, eyes closed half the time, can hardly move, and he breaks out with “I like a fuller bottom.”

I said to him, “Beggars can't be choosy.”

Oh, that was rich. “A fuller bottom.” I laughed about that one for days. He had some real zingers sometimes. They always came out of left field, when you least expected it.

Well, one day we were hanging out by the front windows, like we did a lot, and that's when it all began. We were looking out the windows toward where the beach was, and it was a Sunday. I know it was Sunday because the beach bar across the main road had live music on Sunday, and I could hear the music that day. The band was playing

Caribbean-type music. Mostly that reggae stuff, but every once in a while they'd play something Calypso that had a steel drum in it. I liked the steel drum.

Toni and Joe's was the name of the joint. You couldn't see the place from here, but their sign was right across the street—plain as day. The sign said "Toni and Joe's Beach Bar and Grille" and there was a drawing of a drunken fish holding a martini glass. Kind of a funny sign, I thought.

Well, someone came through the main doors and the smell of Toni and Joe's Grille came seeping in—burgers, fish, chicken, and ribs. The smell was something else. It drowned out the stench of people dying.

That's when Drowsy said to me, "I sure do love a grilled cheeseburger with raw onions."

I said, "I like mine with yellow mustard, a big slice of beefsteak tomato, and a leaf of lettuce." My mouth was watering. It had been so long since I had a grilled anything. I added, "With one of those Jamaican Red Stripe beers with a wedge of lime."

Drowsy told me, "I have never had one of those."

I said, "Well you, my friend, are missing out. A cold Red Stripe on the beach is one of the finer things in life."

You know what he said? "Maybe we should go over there and have a couple of grilled cheeseburgers and some cold beers."

I went along with the joke. "Yeah. Maybe we can ask Ms. Tatum to come along with us."

Drowsy said, "I don't think that would be wise."

I laughed, but something made me think he wasn't kidding about it. That's when we began talking about going to Toni and Joe's, planning it. In the beginning it was just half-joking, half-serious. Every Sunday we'd sit by the windows coming up with schemes to get out the front doors.

Most of the schemes were elaborate, spy movie type of stuff. But sometimes we'd get serious and try to come up with something doable. The reality was that we would need another person to buzz the doors and then we could sneak out.

This went on for weeks. I mean we went about our daily existence, we weren't obsessed or anything, but we talked about it whenever an idea came up. Like I said, it was half-joking, half-serious.

There was this one night. We were watching a movie in the dining room, and that is when it got serious-serious. The movie was *Casablanca*, you know, with Bogey and Bergman. There's this part toward the end of the movie and Bogart's talking to Ingrid Bergman at the airport, the scene before the plane takes off. Bogart says something about how if she's not on the plane when it leaves, she'll regret it, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday, and for the rest of her life. You know, something like that.

That's when Drowsy said to me, "I don't want to die on a hunk of ice. I want to go to Toni and Joe's."

Just like that. Deadpan. Out of the blue. I could tell he was serious. I promised him we'd get there no matter what.

All the elaborate, spy movie schemes were out the window from that point on. And no matter how we sliced it, we needed a third person. A staff person was out of the

question—maybe if we had money, but we didn't. That meant we needed another resident and some incentive to get them to go along with the plan. Then we'd also need to have some type of distraction to get the third person to press the door button when no one was at the desk. It was a tough nut to crack.

The worst part was that the only one of the mopes in this place capable of being the third person was Patsy, and I hadn't talked to her since she called me a racist. It would take time to warm her up enough to ask her to help us.

I had to get her in on the plan, because without the third person the distraction would be useless. After a day or two of waiting for the right moment, I figured, hell, I got to just go up and ask her.

The next time I saw her was at movie night, so I sat down next to her and offered her some of my popcorn. You know, all nice-like. I told her about the plan, and how Drowsy really wants to go. Playing on her sympathy and such. I told her how we needed a third person, how it had to be her.

I said to her, "Let me just get right to it. What'll it take to get you on board?"

She was quiet for a while and then said in a heavy whisper, "A woman has needs."

Whoa, boy! That was not what I was expecting. I mean I almost fell out of my chair. "Are you serious?" I asked.

Apparently so, because she said, "Tonight, after the movie. My room. Give me a half hour to freshen up." She licked the butter off her lips. "Maybe you should freshen up too."

I got up and stumbled out of there. I mean it had been years, maybe more than ten, since, you know, since I'd used my southern region. The pressure was on. I was nervous as hell, but it was for a good cause. And you know, that Patsy wasn't half bad looking if you looked at her the right way. She was no Miss Pearl, but hey, I'm no Clark Gable.

I'll spare you the gory details, but my boys performed like a champ. Let's just say there were some fireworks going off in Patsy's room that night. That woman knows a thing or two, if you know what I mean. I told Drowsy about it the next day and he gave me a grin and a wink that said, "Atta boy."

With Patsy in on the scheme, I parked myself in the communal-room and pretended to be reading. I was really casing the joint, looking for a way for this all to work. I was focusing hard, trying to discover an angle, when all of the sudden it was the same old crap from those two zombies—only this time they were really going at it.

"Mine."

"No. Mine."

Jeez, not again, I thought. It was comical watching those two stiffes swinging lazy punches at each other. Again the staff rushed in, this time to keep the idiots from falling and hurting themselves. I began laughing and then it hit me. That was it. The zombies would be our distraction.

I got together with Drowsy and Patsy that night, after dinner, over by the books. "Look, it's got to be tomorrow. Those zombies are on their second of three strikes. The next time they'll lose their communal-room privileges for at least a month and we can't

wait that long.” I looked at them and they were both focused and listening. I laid out the plan.

The plan was pretty simple, that was the beauty of it. Drowsy and I left lunch early. I had made sure he had some decent clothes on before lunch. So then we went out and sat by the windows, where the comfy chairs were, and waited for the people to come into the communal-room. Patsy sat at the table closest to the reception desk and read a magazine.

After lunch was good because the staff was usually busy getting the residents situated. I waited until the two zombies took their usual places in front of the television, then I nodded to Patsy and made my move. I made sure none of the staff was looking and walked quietly up to the two zombies. I snatched a pillow from one of them and threw it in the lap of the other. That’s all it took.

“Mine.”

“No, Mine.”

“No. Mine.”

“No. Mine.”

I was halfway to Drowsy before the busy staff could react, and by then the fight had escalated to the point where one of the zombies had pushed the other one onto the couch and was doing his best to smother him with the precious pillow. Just as smooth as silk, Patsy rolled her chair over to the reception desk and pressed the button for the door. Then she rolled back to her magazine.

That's all it took. The doors slid open and we slid out. No one was the wiser. We were just two guys going to Toni and Joe's for some beers and burgers. We weren't greedy. The plan was to go for an hour or so, enough time to have some fun without being gone too long. We hoped they wouldn't notice us missing.

Let me tell you something. That was the best cheeseburger I have ever had in my life, and the Red Stripes tasted like they came from heaven. Drowsy loved it. It was like Spring Break or something, because there were college kids everywhere. You should have seen the bathing suits those college girls were wearing.

And get this, they thought we were cute, a couple of old guys out for a good time. They bought us beer, and the hugs from those girls were non-stop. I thought Drowsy was going to explode. Hell, I thought I was going to explode. The girls put some plastic leis around our necks and even put a fringy-straw hat on Drowsy's head. It was a hoot.

We probably stayed longer than we should have, but we were having a blast. While we were waiting to cross the road back to Ocean Vista, Drowsy said to me, "Thank you. That's the best thing anyone's ever done for me." He still had a lei around his neck.

It was a great plan except for the fact that we hadn't really figured out a way to get back in. But it wouldn't have mattered. Ms. Tatum was there at the door waiting for us. She had two male nurses with her.

She told the nurses, "Take Drowsy to his room and lock the other one in his. They are to be separated from this point on."

Before they took me away, Ms. Tatum came in real close to my face and said, "I hope it was worth it."

I didn't bother answering.

Three days later, they rolled Drowsy out on a gurney the same way they rolled him in—except he was in a body bag with no hoses or machines.

Ms. Tatum came over and touched my shoulder. "I'm sorry. You two seemed to get along so well. It's hard, losing a friend."

"Maybe they . . . could they drive him down onto the beach? Just to go past the beach bar, you know, Toni and Joe's?"

Gazing out the door as they loaded him up Ms. Tatum said, "I don't think they're allowed to do anything like that."

She turned and stared at me. "So, what do you think of your little adventure now?"

I pictured Drowsy sitting in the bar surrounded by a bunch of college girls, that goofy straw hat on his head, a beer in his hand, a burger in his belly, and a grin on his face. I shrugged my shoulders and said to her, "Well, he didn't die floating on a hunk of ice, did he?"

Ms. Tatum cocked her head and gave me a look. "What?"

"Never mind," I said and turned and walked away. As I went past the televisions and all the mopes sitting in front of them, I thought to myself *I don't want to die on a hunk of ice either.*

LAND OF FLOWERS

Here, where the sun, once friend, becomes instant foe;
here, where mosquitoes cloud the air stinging, leeching, bringing fever that boils the
blood, burns the soul and consumes the body;
here, where the lush green that surrounds you cuts, saws and tears at your flesh inviting
infection to take residence in the heat of your body;
here, where the mud baked pigs you brought for protein and a means to ferret out Jews
and Muslims have all escaped and watch you suffer from the forest they have now
adopted as home;
here, where they all forever watch you at night with hungry ember eyes;
here, where you slaughtered hundreds of Huguenots and watched their French blood
steam onto the dunes of Matanzas before a god that now seems sorely indifferent;
here, where the sun cooks you alive, where your skin blisters and festers red before your
eyes, spilling hot pus on your cracked leather hide;
here, where there is never any gold no matter how far you trudge, no matter how much
sweat pours out of your body, no matter how many heathens you kill, no matter how
many of your own die, no matter how much you suffer, there is never any gold, never any
gold, only bright orange sun;
here, where night offers little relief, only more heat and puddles of sweat to sleep in;
here, where all manner of beast and reptile and vermin and insect conspire against you,
pick at you, prey upon you, feed upon you;
here, where warm, brown rivers are home to lizards twice a man's size, lizards who bake
in the sun, who lurk in the water ever-waiting with jaws and teeth meant to mangle and
mash human bone;
here, where sweat and sun burn your eyes;
here, in a land of rapid, humid, never-ending decay;
here, where any beauty is an abomination and fleeting and always an omen of misfortune
to come;

here, where the blissful silence of abating bug, bird, and beast noise means only a storm
will soon wreak havoc with rains that mean only more mosquitoes, that mean only more
fever, that mean only more death;

here, in this hell;

here, in this cursed land of flowers—flowers that sting . . . flowers that melt in the heat of
the sun . . . flowers that betray . . . flowers that burn . . . flowers meant only for graves.

NESTS

The winds that were swirling outside the house were remnants of a tropical storm that had passed through a day ago. He had opened the windows earlier, and the winds moved the curtains up and down—making it seem as if the house was breathing, pushing and pulling on him.

The storm had taken the clouds with it on its run up the coast, making the night clear. From his seat at the dining room table, he looked out the window and saw the swaying shadows the moon had made of the oak branches that covered the property. The shadows made a net over the house. Captured, the house breathed in and out.

His wife and daughters were upstairs, sleeping peacefully. He could feel the weight of their well-being pushing down on him. Their four-year-old, Maya, should have cleared her Legos from the table before going to bed, but she had gotten to the point of crying-tiredness, and he hadn't been able to find the energy or desire to play enforcer.

More than halfway through a bottle of red wine, he found himself building a house out of the Legos: a yard made of green tiles, a blue block house, a red tile roof, white windows and door. He assembled the little Lego family in the front yard. The husband. The wife. The daughter. The son. Most of the lights were off downstairs and a candle on the table flickered into the scene, giving it life.

He looked down at the family. Each of them was so happy. They were all smiling and they always would be, no matter what. He watched them for several minutes. He looked at what he had created and thought, *If only it was that easy.*

Tired of the Legos, he left the table, and escaped the house wearing only his boxers. In the backyard, the near-full moon cast shadows that danced around him. He stood still, closed his eyes, and let the wind and moon wash over him. The ocean was nearby and its heavy scent surrounded him.

The rustling of the limbs and leaves being pushed around, the tinkling of the neighborhood's variously pitched wind chimes, the roar of the distant ocean, and the howling and whistling of the wind brought comfort in their uncontrollability. In this little moment, he found the kind of joy a brief reprieve could provide.

And then, scratching. A scratching, quiet at first—but once he heard it—soon drowned out all else. He knew the sound. He knew what it meant and didn't even bother to look up. He knew what it meant. It meant him climbing an extension ladder to the roof's peak two stories up. It meant straddling the peak and scooting along its length using his inner thighs, while holding a twelve-foot pole saw in his hands. It meant trimming the branches off the roof, trying to avoid the power lines, and then scooting backwards to safety.

The first couple times he had trimmed the branches, there was a pay-off in the adrenaline rush the task provided, now there was just fear—fear of dying in a really stupid way. But he had to do it. Not doing it was not an option. If he didn't trim the branches, they would rub, they would scratch, they would gnaw away at the roofing.

A little bare spot, just the mere notion of a hole was all that was needed. Then an animal would come. Come and gnaw, come and pick, come and pull, come and make a

little hole into a bigger one—a hole big enough for the animal to creep in. Creep in and make a home.

The animal would creep in and make a home—a home to coat with feces, with urine, with afterbirth. A home that came showering down on him when he finally fixed the hole in the roof and then pulled the drop ceiling out. He had been shirtless and sweaty at the time, and the raccoon's waste stuck to his face and body. Lesson learned. No, he had to trim the branches. He sighed and went back inside.

It was almost midnight. He finished the wine, put the Legos away, blew the candle out, and climbed the stairs up to their bed. He needed to sleep. Tomorrow, there would be a morning to be reckoned with.

* * *

Two eggs sunny-side up: that's what Maya wanted. She liked to use hot sauce to dot the eyes and make a smiley face on her eggs. The kid loved hot sauce. The baby Evie would hem and haw, but ultimately, a bowl of cereal, with never enough milk, would be her breakfast. Outfits picked out the night before by his daughter, were suddenly unacceptable and his wife had to scurry around to satisfy Maya's finicky fashion sense. No matter how much preparation was done, it was always a mad scramble to get her off to school. And once she was off, he kissed his wife good-bye and left for the office.

The office was a cubicle rented amidst dozens of other identical cubicles. He made himself go—Monday through Friday, week after week—and sit in front of his computer. He was behind on the rent for his office, his cubicle. He looked for new clients, improved his skill set, and waited for the work to flow in like it used to. There

were little projects here and there, but nothing like before. He watched the money in their accounts trickle away. His wife knew they were having financial difficulties, but she had no idea of how bad they were. Self-employment, the dream a few years ago, was becoming more and more a nightmare. They might even lose the house.

The house, so much more than a thing, was a person, a decrepit relative they lived with, tried to maintain, but in the end, probably couldn't save. Even if he had all the time in the world, he didn't have the money to fund the repairs the hundred-year-old house needed. And although he did the best he could, it was never enough. He knew his family deserved better.

When Maya called someone a "dirty rat," he knew it had more meaning to her than it should. Rodents were part of their life experience. The old house had holes he could never find. One day, he overheard his wife explain to Evie that what they had found on the floor actually wasn't a little piece of chocolate. He put out snap-traps, he put out glue traps, he put out trays of bright blue poison, and they worked, but there was always another rat more than willing to follow the scent of the others into the house. It was a never-ending cycle. He imagined his daughter's friends only knew rodents as funny cartoon characters.

* * *

The house was on a narrow, fourteen-mile long barrier island bounded by the Indian River one block to the west and the Atlantic Ocean four blocks to the east. When he was a child, the island provided a new, exciting world to explore: he learned how to surf, caught blue crabs using chicken necks tied to string, discovered the different fish the

ocean had to offer, made soup from the tiny little coquina clams, caught sand fleas and fiddler crabs for bait, and fell asleep every night salty and exhausted. He loved it.

The backyard faced the ocean, which was four blocks away. They couldn't see the ocean from the house, but at night when the traffic noise on the busy street out front was non-existent, they could hear the soothing sound of the sea. The upstairs bedroom faced the backyard and with the windows open the sound lulled them to sleep and greeted them when they woke up in the morning. The winds that traveled in from the ocean played in the backyard, and the breezes cooled them and gave anything they hung out to dry the pleasant smell of the beach.

When he was a child, this backyard was where he and his friends would play croquet, run in the sprinkler, have parties, kick the ball around, and construct the kinds of imaginary worlds that few but children can fathom when faced with a lot of hard-packed earth, stringy beach grass, and stinging nettles with white-star flowers so bright and pain so exquisite.

When he moved into the house as a grownup, he made changes to the backyard. The back got a lot of sun and was dry, so he put in a cactus garden along the concrete slab back porch. There was a red cedar that dominated the yard so much that from a satellite view, you saw little else of the back lot. Its branches grew to the ground and took up space. He cleared the branches to ten feet up and built a little eight foot by eight-foot deck underneath the tree—it offered a place to relax in the shade and even nap if the mood struck you. He built an eight by ten foot tin-roofed shed with a window and

flowerbox with pink geraniums. There were also some scraggly shrubs and little trees he cleared out.

The backyard had always been open along the south side. Open to the dirt alleyway. Open to the neighbor's backyard. Open. Granted the neighbor on the back end of the lot had an old four-foot high chain link fence separating the two properties, but the neighbor's yard was open to the south alleyway, as well. Clearly, this was a utilitarian function as it allowed easy access to one's yard from the alley.

Unfortunately, this "easy access" had become a concern in recent years. The owner of the house south across the alleyway had moved away and was renting the place to what seemed like a steady stream of dealers, addicts, miscreants and ne'er-do-wells. The neighbor on the back end of the lot was an older man of kind heart who always had homeless people camping out in his backyard, as well as one or two boarders of dubious distinction living inside. All these goings-on, mostly tolerable when he was single, became less so when he had a family.

Before the recession, he had begun working on fencing the backyard in, but the lack of income had halted the less than half-finished project. Over the past year, he had been collecting lumber left in construction site dumpsters, getting leftover scraps from friends, and putting aside some cash whenever he could. Now he finally had enough to buy the rest of the fencing, concrete, and posts he needed.

* * *

Saturday. His wife was making pancakes. She looked good doing it. With nothing but a purple tank top and light blue panties on, her body shook as she whisked the batter.

The rest of the family sat around the table. He looked back down at the do-it-yourself manual he had been poring over. Evie sat in her high chair basking in her new found ability to blow bubbles into the strawberry milk in her sippy-cup. She celebrated by banging the cup on her tray and laughing. Maya was coloring and making a general mess with glitter glue.

“Uh, what are you doing, Evie?” Maya asked.

He looked up from his manual. “She’s happy. She figured out how to blow bubbles in her sippy-cup.”

“Why is she banging the cup like that?”

“I think she wants us to watch. Honey, come here. Evie’s got something to show us.” his wife came from the kitchen.

He prompted Evie. “Okay Evie, blow some bubbles. Show us. Blow some bubbles.” She blew and blew, and bubbles filled the cup to the point that, when she stopped and pulled her mouth away, bubbles started flowing out of the cup’s straw. Amazed, she grinned and bammed the cup over and over and showered them with pink strawberry milk.

“Whoa! Whoa, coo-koo.” his wife grabbed the cup away. “Too messy.” Evie’s face trembled before emitting a long, red-faced wail. His wife got Evie out of her high chair, calmed her down, and then put her back before going back to the kitchen to finish making the pancakes.

“So what’s the plan for the day?” She asked as she licked batter from her finger and made a face that made it clear that raw pancake batter was disgusting.

“Uh . . . I thought I told you last night.”

“Uh . . . you, like, totally didn’t.” She teased.

“I was kind of hoping you and the girls could stay at your parents today and tomorrow. So I could finish the fence and work on some stuff inside the house, too.”

“Sure, I guess. But don’t you need help with the fence?” She served the pancakes.

“I wanna help,” Maya chimed in.

“No, bebe. Maybe when you’re a little older,” he answered.

His wife sat down to eat, and he finally answered her. “I’ll give Kyle a call if I need a hand.”

“Sure you will.” She knew he wouldn’t. She knew he wanted to do it on his own.

About six years ago, he moved into the house, the beach house that had been in his family since he was a child. His wife moved in two years later when they were married. The house was a small, hundred-year old, two story, shingle-sided place that he worked on whenever time and finances allowed. The publishing firm he worked for entered a “down-sizing” phase, which precipitated his move to the beach house. He became an independent contractor for the publisher and figured if he was going to work from home, home might as well be at the beach. He was “living the dream.” The “dream” of working from home became less of one once the kids came along, and he decided to rent the cubicle.

With his wife and the kids at the in-laws, he could finally finish fencing in the backyard. He grabbed his manual, a beer, sat down at the table on the back porch, and

looked over his work-in-progress. All the fence posts were set with concrete anchors, now he needed to put up twelve six-foot by eight-foot sections of privacy fencing.

Deep into thought, and on his second beer, his cell phone rang, and his wife's picture appeared on the screen.

"How's it going, handyman?"

"Oh, you know, just plugging along." he got up from the table and walked out into the backyard to make his "plugging along" sound somehow more believable.

"How's it going over there?" he asked.

"We're playing in the pool now. You should have seen Maya and Bop-bop playing earlier. She had him build a fairy fort with her out of blankets and chairs. It was cute."

"I take it he didn't watch the football game."

"Not a chance with Maya around. But he had fun."

"Well, I better get back to work."

"Okay, love you. Good luck."

"Thanks, love you too." And he went back to work, which really meant he stopped dallying and began to work.

The days had been beautiful and the fence came together with relative ease. With the house being no stranger to fix-it projects remaining unfinished for long periods of time, it was nice to have something significant finished. His wife and the girls came home late Sunday afternoon, and his wife was surprised to find that the fencing was finally complete. "It looks amazing. Thanks honey."

Maya ran around the yard over and over again. “This is awesome. Can I play in the yard more now?”

His wife answered. “Yes, but you still need Mommy or Dada out here with you.”

With Evie asleep in a sling over her shoulder, his wife gave him a gentle hug. “It really looks good. Thank you.” They were safer now. He felt proud.

Months passed. Evie was beginning to wobble around. His wife was getting more sleep. He’d had a good run of small, but profitable, projects come through. And Maya was becoming, more and more, her own little person. Life was pretty good.

Maya had been playing in the backyard almost every day. Small as it was, the backyard had become a vast world in her imagination, full of adventure, challenges, and friends—just like it had been for him. His wife brought the portable crib out there and hung out on the deck while Maya amused herself. Beyond her fantasy world of fairies, rocket ships, mermaids, wizards, and pirates, Maya also had some fun that didn’t involve her imagination. His wife and Maya built a raised bed garden and grew some vegetables and herbs for the table.

Maya made friends with the three black racer snakes that sunned themselves in the cactus garden. He told her about how he had come across a mama black racer when he was clearing out some brush to put the fence in and Maya promptly decided that the three snakes must be siblings and the children of the mama snake he had met. She named them: Scareth Killmice (the older brother), Sassy Killmice (the middle sister), and Speedy (the youngest brother, who was, apparently, too fast for a last name).

His wife made a balance beam out of two cinderblocks and a two by four left over from the fencing project. He came home for lunch sometimes, and they would have a family picnic out on the deck, or as Maya liked to call it now—the stage.

One day, his wife took Evie to the pediatrician for a check up, and he stayed home to play with Maya. “DaDa, I want to dance on the stage.” She loved to twirl, spin, and play at ballet on the stage. But the cedar loved to shed and he usually had to sweep up debris before they could go on the deck. The night before had been windy, so the deck was pretty much completely covered in the tiny scale-like cedar leaves.

“Okay. Let me sweep it first,” he said.

Maya played on the balance beam.

When he stood on the deck, his head was almost up in the lower branches, and he had to watch to avoid hitting his head on a limb. As he started to sweep he looked up and saw a nest in an early phase of development.

“Come here,” he said to Maya.

“What,” she replied. “What is it?”

“Just come here.” he lifted her up into the branches and showed her the nest in progress.

“What is it?” Maya asked.

“It’s a bird’s nest. The mother will lay her eggs there and sit on them until the baby birds hatch. We’ll keep an eye on it, but we may not be able to play on the deck for awhile because it will probably disturb the birds.” Maya was a little upset about losing

use of the deck, but excited about the prospect of watching the birds, the nest, and the eggs being hatched.

Standing by the backroom windows they were about ten feet away from the deck and at eye level with the nest being built. After several days of keeping away from the deck and keeping an eye out the window, he finally caught sight of the birds working on the nest. The family watched the birds flit about as they added twigs and leaves to make their nest complete. Maya even put her hair from her haircut in the yard for the birds to use in their nest and was thrilled to see them pick up the hair and fly off to their nest.

The birds were Mourning Doves. Mourning Doves are called such because of their plaintive, sorrowful song. Though hardly exotic, he found the Mourning Dove to be one of the most beautiful birds with their startling, shiny black eyes and black beak set against the muted grey and peachish-pinkish-brown tones of their feathers.

The doves took turns sitting on the eggs, and after about two weeks there were two little squabs squeaking for sustenance. As a family, they had been watching all along and were excited with the birth of the two fledglings. Maya was learning something about the beauty and nature of life as he was being reminded of it.

A few days after the arrival of the baby birds, he was in the kitchen downstairs when he heard a ruckus in the backyard. Running out back he went straight to the nest and was relieved to see the dove on the nest, but something was wrong. As he looked at the dove, a single bright red drop of blood seeped from its chest and then another and then another. He looked past the nest and saw the cause of it all sitting on a fence post nearby—a squirrel. He hurled a stone at it and the squirrel scampered away.

“What’s going on DaDa?” Maya asked.

“There’s a squirrel trying to hurt the baby birds.”

“Why.”

“I don’t know.”

His wife did some research online and found out that the cute little acorn-eating squirrels were also carnivorous—often preying on fledgling birds. Maya was upset. They all were. It seemed disgusting to him as he had a fear of rodents and visualized the squirrel gnawing on the baby birds with its long, bloody incisors. He and his wife decided that they would protect the nest from the squirrel if it came back. And it did. The squirrel came back and back and back again. The squirrel was relentless in its desire to feast on the baby birds.

Maya learned early on where meat came from—animals. Around the time she was two his wife and he made it a point to start letting her know about the animals they ate:

“Steak comes from cows, we eat them.”

“See the hop-hop, the rabbit? Dada eats rabbit.”

“Dada caught this snook. Don’t be afraid he’s dead. We catch them so we can eat them. The fish eat the shrimp, and we eat the fish.”

Maya knew how the food chain worked, but the thought of the squirrel eating the defenseless baby birds was too much for her to handle. She’d grown attached to the birds, and couldn’t believe that a cute little squirrel wanted to kill them.

The front half of the house was covered by an ancient and massive live oak whose bearded tentacles spread out to fill the area with a lattice of shade. The primary resident

of this tree was a cantankerous squirrel they named Miss Sass. The live oak rose from the earth about two yards from the house's wrap-around front porch, and this porch was, for a few years, the focal point of a property dispute between him and Miss Sass.

She felt that the porch was part of her domain—the tree. He begged to differ and maintained that, obviously, due to its literal attachment it was part of his domain—the house. She asserted her opinion by racing down the tree to meet their arrival on the porch with a barrage of squirrel chatter and screams. He would sometimes, in turn, try to reason with her. On his end, the exchanges were mostly playful although sometimes he yelled back at her in frustration. Sometimes Maya would get involved:

“No, Miss Sass. No.”

Eventually he cut Miss Sass some slack after figured out that she was probably protecting her litters. No doubt, her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren populated the area and the marauder was probably one of her offspring.

“Are the baby birds going to be okay?” Maya asked.

“Yes, bebe, we'll protect them,” he replied. And he needed to protect them. He saw the squirrel eating the baby birds as perfect fodder to stoke the appetite of the terrors, something to give them strength.

* * *

It had been a couple weeks since their last visit, and it had seemed like they were going away, but that night the screams came. He sprinted up the stairs, as fast as he could. Skipping steps, as fast as he could. He should have heard sooner. He should have

gotten there sooner. Even though he was downstairs, he should have heard sooner. It was his job. He should have been there sooner.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. Dada’s here. Dada’s here. Everything’s going to be okay.” he sat in Maya’s bed, held her close, rocked her back forth, and talked in a soft, soothing voice. “Dada loves you. Mommy loves you. Evie loves you. We’re all here with you.” The wails became sobs.

His wife, bleary-eyed and half asleep, stumbled into the room. He whispered, “I got it, honey. Go back to sleep. I got it.” She stumbled back to bed.

Maya was still sobbing, and her body was trembling in his arms. Her eyes were wide open in horror, but she was still asleep. He looked straight into her eyes. She couldn’t see him. He continued trying to talk her down from the heights of whatever was frightening her.

“It’s okay. Dada’s right here with you. We’re in our house. Let’s go downstairs. Everything’s going to be okay.” he scooped up her shivering, four-year old frame and made his way down one step at a time. She was cold, clammy, sweaty, and he felt like he was—once again—at war with demons for her soul.

We were almost there. “Don’t worry, Maya. Dada’s here with you. We’re in our house. You’re safe here. Mommy and sister are here. Look, look. Dada’s here with you.” He stood in the bathroom, in front of the full-length mirror on the bathroom door, and held her quivering body. With eyes glazed, she sobbed and gasped for air.

“Look, Maya. Look in the mirror. Who’s that? It’s Dada and Maya. Look we’re here in the bathroom. What in the world? How’d we get here?” he made sure she was

facing the mirror, they were about a foot away from their reflection. There they were a father and a terrified daughter.

“Look. Who’s that holding you?” Her sobs and gasps began to become whimpers. She wiped at her face.

“Who’s that holding you? Who’s that guy? Who’s that in the mirror?”

Her body was relaxed, and she answered, “It’s Dada. Dada.”

“Who’s he holding?”

“Maya.”

“Where are we?”

“The bathroom.”

“That’s right. Everything is okay, bebe. Dada loves you.” he drew her in for a hug. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

This was the night terrors.

Maya didn’t remember any of it the morning, she never did. They didn’t talk to her about it, she was too young to understand, and it would have probably just made her afraid to sleep. His wife and he were used to it; even the baby, Evie, slept through it at that point. But it was horrible every time it happened because whatever was going on in her head was real to Maya. And the power of the terrors never diminished, no matter how many times they came to visit.

Usually he had no idea what she was seeing. What fears would a four-year old mind have to draw upon? He couldn’t even guess what she was experiencing, he just

wanted to drive the terrors out as soon as they sought purchase inside of her. But this time he knew.

The terrors didn't come every night, and his wife figured out that if Maya made it through the first hour of sleep with no distractions, the terrors were far less likely to appear. When the terrors did appear, they usually began with whimpers and sobs that, if left unchecked, became wails and screams. They usually caught it before that.

When the baby came along nine months ago, his wife had to adjust her bedtime routine to make sure Evie was sound asleep before putting Maya to bed. His wife was breastfeeding, which meant being up about every two hours during the night to feed Evie. He tried to get to the terrors first so that his wife could get some sleep.

A full-blown attack, like this one, hadn't happened in months, and this was one of the worst ever—maybe because this one had a real life event driving it.

Maya had a rough start coming into this world, and the first month of her life was spent in the hospital. He remembered sitting, with tear-filled eyes, in the hospital parking lot at night, soldiering up the strength to go into the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit to visit a wife and daughter who could easily become memories in the near future. He sat in the car, in the same spot every night, facing the hospital from the farthest parking spot in the lot. The spot afforded him a longer walk to pull it all together.

Sometimes he sat there for a few minutes, once it took an hour. In the N.I.C.U., he would spell his wife and watch Maya for the night. Maya would cry and wail for hours at a time, and he would hold her close, walk around the room, sing to her, and tell her, "You

give it all to me, little one.” he wanted to absorb it all, take it away, and make it go away. It was the same with the terrors; he wanted to make it all go away.

* * *

Before, they had kept away from the deck so as not to disturb the birds, now they were always (at least one of them) sitting by the deck, hanging out, and keeping watch. Still the squirrel would come. He heaved stones and rocks, never striking the squirrel, but scaring it away. His wife, apparently a better aim, struck the squirrel hard with a stone on at least one occasion. Still the squirrel came. He took to sleeping lightly downstairs on the futon by the windows near the nest. He also decided to get the gun out of the shed.

The “gun” was actually barely that. It was a Crossman 760 Pump-master BB gun—basically a starter rifle for children. His parents had never allowed guns of any sort in the household, but his great Uncle Eddy had had a BB gun and, to his delight, taught him to shoot it as a youngster. He purchased the rifle less than a year ago to ward off raccoons that ate the potted vegetables they had before the raised bed, the opossums that wrought havoc on the back porch, and large river rats that wanted to sneak into the house.

The gun’s power was controlled by the number of times you pumped the lever with ten being the maximum. On the occasions when he used the gun in the past, he would typically give the weapon just a few pumps in order to scare away the target without injuring it.

Maya saw him with the BB gun. “Are you going to shoot the squirrel DaDa?”

“Yes, but only to scare it off.”

It was several days into their vigil to save the birds and several nights of his barely sleeping. He spent his nights on the futon listening for the squirrel and for Maya's whimpering in order to catch the terrors early on.

During that time, he hit the squirrel a few times with the BB's when it attacked, but still it came again—more and more determined. He was tired, they were all on edge, Maya's terrors were coming every night, and the squirrel was not going to stop.

It was bright out and hot. The squirrel ran along the top edge of the south fence to mount another attack. His shot missed this time, and the squirrel ran back along the fence to the far corner of yard and into a couple of Norfolk Island pines there. The squirrel was about ten feet up the pines and straddling the trunk, frozen. He was about twenty feet away.

It wasn't going to stop. The squirrel was going to keep on coming after the birds. Maya was visibly upset every time she knew the squirrel was attacking. He pumped the gun ten times and took aim at the squirrel's haunch hoping to injure it out of their lives.

The outcome was unknown, but he knew. In that instant—he knew. He took aim. He pulled the trigger sending the copper ball toward the marauder. The ammo was slightly off target and hit the squirrel's spine. The wound spurted blood.

The squirrel tried to scamper away, but was paralyzed from its shoulders down and stayed hugging the trunk. It looked confused. Adrenaline must have propelled the squirrel as it suddenly pulled itself up the trunk, across a branch and into the neighbor's backyard using only its front legs.

He went out the gate to find the squirrel and end its suffering, but the squirrel was nowhere to be found. It would be nice to imagine that the squirrel hunkered down in some safe spot, nursed its wounds, and, lesson learned, went off to live somewhere else.

“The squirrel is gone,” he said. “The babies are safe now.”

“DaDa, where did it go?” his daughter asked.

“The squirrel wasn’t going to stop. I killed it. It was going to kill the baby birds.”

He paused. “It makes me sad, but I killed him.”

* * *

That was years ago. There is a third child now. He and his wife feel blessed. And earlier tonight and as the sun set, he walked around the backyard in the golden-pink light. His wife was upstairs putting the girls and baby to sleep. He listened to the ocean. He looked up over the fence, three pelicans drifted by and he thought *how beautiful*. And, as he always does, he looked for nests being built in order to tear them down.